TSUKIMONOGATARI

POSSESSION TALE

NISIOISIN

TRANSLATED BY
DANIEL JOSEPH

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VERTICAL.

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Art by VOFAN

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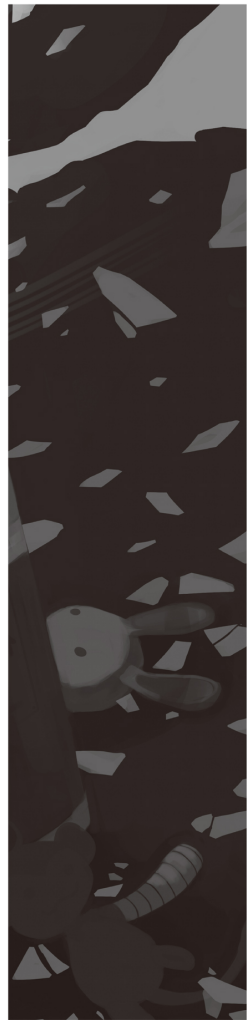

CHAPTER BODY

YOTSUGI DOLL

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YO TSUGI O NONOKI

001

Yotsugi Ononoki is a doll. To put it another way, she's not human. Not a person, not a living being, not a part of the natural world—that's Yotsugi Ononoki, a tsukumogami possession employed as a shikigami familiar.

Though to all appearances she's just an adorable tween.

This expressionless child, who delights all and sundry with her eccentricities, is in truth an aberration, an apparition, a monster, one of the endless varieties of ghosts 'n goblins with which nature abounds.

For which reason.

She's hopelessly incompatible with human society.

"Nay, truth to tell, my lord, 'tis not so—not that lass," came Shinobu's response. From within my shadow. "For she springs originally from a human corpse, and is a doll—a creation patterned after humankind. An imitation of a person."

Then.

Then does that mean she's trying to be, or become, human? But when I voiced this question, Shinobu informed me that I was still off the mark.

To be patterned.

Proves you aren't trying to be it.

It's only a means for mingling with human society—for making her compatible—and not a means for assimilation.

"However skillful thou mayst become in a foreign tongue, however

much dost study it and speak it like ’twere thine own, ’tis only ever for the sake of communicating with the people of a foreign land, and thou mayst not wish to become their countryman—’tis much the same. She was made in the image of humankind, but not for the sake of being human or becoming human. ’Twas for being with humans.”

Not to be, nor to become.

To be with.

That foreign language analogy really did the job—well, bringing other countries into the mix makes it all terribly global, but framing it in terms of other cultures does put us back in the realm of everyday conversation for me, or for anyone, I bet.

In order to forge a positive relationship with someone from another culture, you’ve got to see through the eyes of that culture—when in Rome, as they say.

“Come, my lord. Hast thou never considered why aberrations, why monstrous beings of legend, wear the aspects of human beings or of animals—to wit, why the form of the unreal is founded in reality?”

I never had.

I mean, can’t we just say that our imagination has its limits? We can’t picture, can’t visualize, things that aren’t, so we fashion them by spicing up things that are.

Take Shinobu Oshino’s base form, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, for instance—though a vampire, a beautiful demon, she was ultimately modeled on a human being.

When she sprouted wings, they were a bat’s.

When she bared her fangs, they were a wolf’s.

Though she embodied the unreal and surreal as a vampire, substantially she was an assemblage of realistic elements—no more than an idealization.

A beauty that no painting can capture isn't going to be captured in a painting.

A beauty that our eyes can't behold isn't going to be beheld by our eyes.

To resort to another linguistic analogy, people can only relate reality using the words available to them—however inexpressible the reality, however inexhaustible the dream, in the end we have to rely on our voices and our pens.

Expressing with words.

Exhausting them.

But we can't just say that, I suppose. Aberrations, whose appearances are modeled on, and dictated by, the limits of our imagination aren't going to take it lying down. Sure, they're unstable, they change their appearance depending on the observer and transform depending on their surroundings, but I bet they desire a fixed form.

So I couldn't say anything—certainly not to the aberration right there in front of me, Shinobu, a former vampire who now looked like an eight-year-old blonde of all things.

Having read my thoughts, and for that reason not touching on the matter, she said, "All in all, 'tis because people exist, because they are, that aberrations are too. Which meanest not the latter are dependent upon the former—'tis simply that if none observe, none are observed either."

I had to wonder.

I assumed she was talking about the so-called Observer Effect, but this sounded different—it was something else, not some theory, but more emotional and sentimental, so to speak.

"Every presence, every act, requireth a witness lest it be devoid of meaning. Untold, any tale of heroes or of aberrations may as well have ne'er been." Shinobu seemed to be reflecting on her own experiences. "I have been called a legendary vampire—but if those

legends did not exist, 'twould be as if I were no vampire at all. An aberration that goes unheralded is not worthy of the name."

Weird tales must be weird in the telling, she remarked.

"Though 'tis less mine own thinking or values than that execrable Aloha shirt's, ultimately an aberration is a deep attachment."

Deep attachment feeling.

Like empathizing with a doll? You could say that's how tsukumogami, or more generally the spirit of not being wasteful, the mottainai obake, is born.

They say the belief that gods reside in everything, that there are eight million of them, is native to Japan, but empathizing with something that isn't human, be it living or inanimate, isn't unique to one culture.

Which is why tales of aberrations are told throughout the world.

Told by humans.

It was a pretty convincing argument, or rather, an argument I had no choice but to be convinced by, as someone who's spoken of so many aberrations.

And told their tales.

Of a vampire.

Of a cat.

Of a crab.

Of a snail.

Of a monkey.

Of a snake.

Of a bee.

Of a phoenix.

As someone who has, I had no choice but to be convinced.

And now I'm about to speak again, of a doll this time, but I have the sneaking feeling that I've been telling too many tales.

Urban legend, word on the street, or secondhand gossip, it's all just idle chatter if you speak of it too much. It ceases to be eerie, or alarming—when I think back to the beginning of second term and the bizarre "Darkness," or to the matter of Nadeko Sengoku's godly serpent-god from around New Year's, I have to ask how long this is going to continue, and feel a little exhausted. Since my tricks are starting not to work on these aberrations that keep coming out of the woodwork, I'm kind of sinking into despair—though that feeling is a luxury.

Forever, is how long.

Our world doesn't afford that luxury, I ought to have known by now—but it's a little too late for ought's.

Every tale comes to an end.

My, my, I guess the crazy times weren't quite over yet—even that refrain has its limits.

Because the story I'm about to tell you about a doll is also the story of how I "learned that"—learned it, whether I liked it or not.

So this is the beginning of the end.

The tale of how I, the human being called Koyomi Araragi—began to end.

002

“Rise and shine, big brother!”

“Come on, you can’t sleep all day!”

That morning I developed a sudden philosophical interest on the issue of alarm clocks. To be frank, I dislike the term alarm clock almost as much as the existence of the things themselves. I’ve never liked them. At all. In fact, they disgust me. I’ve never liked them for a single moment. I feel a singular, momentous disdain for alarm clocks.

But as to why I dislike them so much, the answer is guaranteed to come out sounding like some kind of Zen exercise. Do I hate them for being alarm clocks, are they alarm clocks because I hate them, or are they hate clocks because I alarm them? While the unvarnished truth is that I’ve wished for every single alarm clock in the world to go to hell, I don’t believe that everything that goes to hell must be an alarm clock. That thought never even crossed my mind. If that proposition were true, wouldn’t it mean that I myself am an alarm clock, since I’m almost certainly headed for hell?

You, yourself, being an alarm clock—who’d ever want to grapple with that fear?

There is one proposition that I have considered, however, and I’d love to run it by you. I need to run it by you. It inevitably arises when I consider the question of why I, or in fact, probably everyone in the world, or at least most people, the vast majority of the majority anyway, loathe and abhor alarm clocks as if they’ve wronged our loved ones. Perhaps it’s not a proposition but the proper position—I honestly feel sheepish about describing my own realization as if it’s some kind of grand discovery, but anyway, maybe people find alarm clocks so difficult to like because the words clock and alarm together sound too much like lukewarm.

Something that's not hot enough.

Something you took the trouble to heat up that went and cooled down.

All for naught, a wasted effort.

That act, which even smacks of a blasphemous revolt against the law of entropy, shares something with the irritation of being jolted from sleep, and this is why I, we, why all the world holds such a deep hatred for alarm clocks—I call it the Nuance Proposition. And it doesn't end there; I propose that similar words end up with similar implications and drag similar emotional responses along behind them. I can give you any number of examples. Take Bruce Lee and brûlée. I think we can all agree that they share the quality of being awesome.

But even putting aside the veracity of the Nuance Proposition, it must be noted that there are some minor issues with its application to our hatred of alarm clocks. First of all, as I've discussed at length, it's an affliction shared by humanity the world over, whereas the likeness between the clock-alarm combo and lukewarm is specific to one language, unfortunately rendering the proposition's use as the sole expositor of the phenomenon somewhat vexed. I haven't thoroughly examined the literature on the subject, but nonetheless suspect that the alarm clock predates modern English. It calls for a trial translation of both phrases into, say, ancient Greek, but a second piece of counter-evidence frees us from that need.

This second point is a so-called irrefutable rebuttal, and thus not really the second but the ultimate piece of counter-evidence: even if we limit the field of inquiry to languages where the two phrases are indeed similar, the average person probably learns the term alarm clock prior to lukewarm.

That's some counter-evidence.

You might say irrefutable.

Upon reflection, I myself feel unclear to this day about the precise meaning of lukewarm. Luke, warm. From the word itself I can just

about grasp that something has been at least partially warmed, but any request for a concise definition would be greeted with grave silence on my part. I would remain as silent as the grave. In fact, if we refuse to let go of the Nuance Proposition, perhaps what we're really talking about here is alarm clock having a negative influence on lukewarm rather than the other way around.

Still, I hate alarm clocks.

A wise man once said there's no accounting for taste, some people have a taste for accounting—which is all well and good, but it's equally true that no one wants to feel like the kind of nobody whose preferences are based on nothing. Everybody wants to be a somebody. Surely I am no snob to want to ascribe a reason to them, for the sake of my own worth, even if it requires straining interpretation.

And I trust we can also agree that it is because I'm not a snob that I'm about to lead the discussion into even more profound territory. "I am not unthinking, therefore I am unthinkable"—well put, or actually it's me putting it like some maxim, I must be the first person in human history to put down those cryptic (or crappy) words. All thinkers must of course recognize the debt they owe to their predecessors, but you don't get to blame them for your stupidity.

Anyway, back to alarm clocks.

Alarm clocks, for waking up.

I'm not sure how this could have happened, but I somehow forgot to explain the second law of the Nuance Proposition: the appearance clause, which goes beyond the way it sounds. Words with similar appearances provide similar sensations, and what's similar is assumed to be the same. If the first hypothesis is auditory, then this second is visual.

Take for example E and F. They don't sound a thing alike, but because their shape is ninety-percent similar, the nuance we derive must be similarly similar. I and L would of course provide an equally valid demonstration of this principle.

And from this we can derive the similarity between a lack of self-awareness and a clock of self-awakeness—it'd be no surprise if some people deemed them equivalent, synonymous. Leaving aside the initial c, a little bit of pressure turns an a into an o, and surely no one will dispute that with the addition of a small line or two, r becomes k.

In which case a lack of self-awareness and a clock of self-awakeness are the same thing.

Even if they're not identical, they're nearly identical. No evidence has yet been offered to refute this.

And the word, or rather phrase, or maybe I should call it a line… Anyway, whatever you call it, however you put it, "a lack of self-awareness" does not carry a positive implication.

They say it's not about what was said but who said it, and they've said it so many times that I'm sick of hearing it, but no matter who utters the phrase "a lack of self-awareness"—no matter who told you that—it's uniformly and fundamentally a rebuke, or dare I say an insult.

You're not very self-aware, huh?

Not too self-aware, are ya, buddy.

No one would take such a remark as a compliment—even if it were said affectionately by one's teacher or master, even knowing it was said with one's best interests at heart, there's not a person on earth whose feelings wouldn't be at least a bit hurt.

The notion that this antipathy might be connected to our negative emotions toward alarm clocks is both logically and intellectually compelling, and as far as I'm concerned it leaves no room for argument. Alarm clocks are themselves manifestations of a lack of self-awareness, so to speak.

If I am hesitant to present this theory in academic circles, it is by no means because I have reservations about accepting the concomitant honor and prestige, but rather for the two reasons outlined above.

In other words, the congruence between a lack of self-awareness and a clock of self-awakeness is once again a phenomenon specific to one language, and while I cannot make such an extreme pronouncement as I did regarding lukewarm, people learning about their own lack of self-awareness before learning about alarm clocks strikes me as a contradiction.

Leaving aside our vocabularies, or our order of linguistic acquisition, it makes some kind of intuitive sense that a person wouldn't be scolded for a lack of self-awareness before "waking up" from some kind of standby state. It seems slightly foolish to rely on gut feelings in the course of our reasoning, and yet intuition can prove to be a surprisingly reliable tool.

When people say, "I have a bad feeling about this," for instance, they're often correct. Because, alas, we can say with certainty that there's no such thing as a life, or even a day, when not a single bad thing happens. Not a single such day in our entire lives. And that's why it's much more auspicious to blatantly disregard this fact and declare first thing in the morning, in the way of autosuggestion, "Seems like something good will happen again today!" Just tell yourself, "I've got a good feeling about this," whether or not you do. Because there's also no such thing as a life, or a day, when not a single good thing happens—in fact, if you've woken up in circumstances where you can still make that statement, you're having a pretty good day. In any event, trust your instincts. In fact, alarm clocks and a lack of self-awareness having precious little to do with each other is something you might realize quite well without having to think about it, even if you can't explain why.

Let us forget about the Nuance Proposition for now, if we may.

It was a bad joke, okay?

Like waking up on the wrong side of the bed.

If seeking things that are like an alarm clock is a futile endeavor, just as seeking people who are like ourselves often is, might we not instead consider the thing itself? They say like attracts like, but if we interpret this as friendship, or fellow feeling, then it's hard to imagine an alarm clock having any friends, or fellows. Hence, it is

only in speaking about the alarm clock as a unique entity in the world, a unique concept, that we can discover the true nature of our loathing. It is only in so doing that the man can become the master.

Alarm clock, alarm clock, alarm clock.

Mclockalar.

If you repeat the words it starts to sound like mackerel, at which a thoroughly average Japanese person like myself can't help but be reminded of breakfast. A joyful association, but we've decided for the time being to dispense with associations, so I won't say any more on the subject.

Here's the real issue.

The term in question is alarm clock, but what alarm means in this instance is cause to wake up□it is thus a clock that causes a target, the person sleeping next to it, instantiated in this case as me, to wake up. That's the definition of an alarm clock, or its raison d'être to put it in slightly exaggerated terms. If it didn't cause me to wake up, it'd be an un-alarming clock.

Which is hard to say.

And now we come to it.

It is without a doubt due to the maddening pushiness of the word alarm itself that I, that we loathe alarms clocks so much. People, left alone, generally tend to wake up, and I do feel a Luddite-like antipathy toward the very idea of relying on a machine, but all of this begs the fundamental question of why we have to wake up in the first place.

Not waking up means dreaming. Waking up means abandoning our dreams, which doesn't leave a particularly good impression. Not particularly good, or not to mince words, bad. It would be appropriate to call it the embodiment of heinousness.

Recessions, economic slumps, an uncertain future.

Precisely because we live in a world that is hostile to dreams,

shouldn't at least nighttime offer a space for them? The behavior of alarm clocks, who so churlishly upend this (and yes, I will anthropomorphize them with a "who") is unforgivable. We all learn the truth of this world at some point. Why rouse sleeping children from their dreams?

I'd rather not wake up, thank you very much.

Nor waken, awaken, or be woken.

People like to say "bright and early," but if it's so goddamned early, how about you let me sleep a little longer? Forget early, how about we go for just right. If you were nice enough to say good night to me before I went to bed, then let me get a good night's sleep! To be perfectly honest, when someone who wished me a good night gives me the bright-and-early treatment the next morning, I feel somewhat betrayed.

Betrayal is tragic.

To begin with, it's been proven that needing to wake up just because it's morning is hopelessly outdated. History has proven this. Humanity has become nocturnal, as is evident from the mostly late-night broadcast times of anime, Japan's proudest international cultural export. Even biologists will recognize the ironclad fact in the not too distant future; it is no joke. Study and construction work are also carried out late at night. In becoming nocturnal, humanity is poised to evolve further. In time, the significations of the Moon and the Sun may become reversed. Indeed, morning is when people should sleep, and alarm clocks, who wake people up in the morning, indeed must be called works of fiendish deviltry for obstructing our evolution.

I get it.

I get why people want to depend on alarm clocks, their functionality□but now is when we summon the courage to wean ourselves from that function. A time for clean breaks is at hand.

Can't we just stop worrying about the whole "waking up" thing? A life of loafing is at least good for a laugh. In fact, isn't a life that

isn't laughable kind of lame?

Why not go through life looking at smiling faces everywhere you go?

So this is what we should say to alarm clocks.

With gratitude, not animus.

"Thank you. And good night."

"Wake up already!!"

"Wake up already!!"

Punched. Kicked.

Jabbed. Head-butted.

And right where it counts. It'd take too long to enumerate the many vital areas of the human body targeted by these attacks, so I'll leave that to your imagination and simply state that they were only the most critical. Were I not to make this clear, my blinding agony and the ensuing developments would make less sense.

"What a long excuse for not wanting to get up, big brother."

"And we're not some clock, we're your sisters. Your alarm sisters."

So said Karen Araragi and Tsukihi Araragi, my two little sisters, as they stood planted on either side of my bed like the vajra kings. I don't mean this metaphorically, it's not a rhetorical analogy to spice up the narrative, they really were expressing their fuming discontent by striking the alpha-and-omega poses of statues flanking a temple gate.

Karen, with her mouth open.

And Tsukihi, mouth closed.

Cool.

I hope they make figurines of them like that.

“So what? According to the Nuance Proposition of Professor Me, similar words can be deemed identical.”

“Boy let me tell ya, ‘sister’ and ‘clock’ ain’t similar at all,” Karen kicked me in Kansai-ben. Not only was her intonation off, since she has no ties to the region whatsoever, but the boy let me tell ya came out sounding liked boiled meathead.

Sounds like quite a recipe.

And Tsukihi added, “I’ve heard of a grandfather clock, but…”

That seemed less like a retort than a quibble, but from it I derived the (leap of) logic for my next idea.

“I’ve got it! We’ll sell merchandise called ‘Sisterclock.’ Karen the big hand and Tsukihi the little hand. Wakes you up in the morning with the voices of Ms. Kitamura and Ms. Eguchi.”

“Hey, keep their names out of it.”

“The anime’s already over, big brother. No more tie-in products.”

“Oh…”

How sad.

Such a sad fact.

But sad as it might be, it was a reality that I needed to accept.

Though judging from how they woke me up in the anime version’s style, Karen and Tsukihi were clinging to the past in their own way.

“Urr～～～～r.”

This wasn’t me confronting that shocking reality; talking with my sisters, I had woken up, sobered up, perked up somewhat and stretched out from that curled-up ball of blinding agony. On all fours, looking like some sexy cat. Koyomi Araragi’s cougar pose isn’t something I want you to try and picture.

“All right, I’m up. I’ve regained consciousness.” I faced my Sisterclock, sorry, sisters. “What century is it?”

“Nah. Quit pretending you just woke up from cryosleep.”

“You haven’t been asleep long enough for it to be a new century.”

A twin-engine retort, surround sound□a comedy trio with two straight men, or rather women, is pretty rare, I think?

Wanting another taste of the rare experience, I kept going. I threw them a softball.

“If they’ve woken me up, does that mean they’ve found the cure?”

“As if you’re somebody they’d freeze until they found one.”

“They’ll never develop a medicine that can help you, big brother.”

Nice.

Karen was in an unfortunate position, though, stopping at an inoffensive jibe against her older brother while Tsukihi lay into me with no respect.

“Is the nuclear war over?” I asked next.

“What’s unclear? It’s not over.”

“Huh?!”

Tsukihi was startled by Karen’s line.

I take it back.

When Karen bombed she dragged her little sister down with her, a truly unfortunate position for Tsukihi.

“Hmm…but I think this could work. Coming up next episode: The Three Araragis.”

“We told you, big brother, the anime run is over. And that means no more previews of the next episode.”

“No more promotional videos, either.”

Relentless.

No more PVs either, huh?

“Damn… Looks like we’re back to square one. Starting over from scratch, with the bare essentials.”

The “bare” bit might make Kanbaru happy, but we had to adopt that mindset.

Starting over from scratch.

If we gave it our all, maybe we’d grace your screens again.

“In which case, Karen, give me the time of day.”

“One, two, three, four, five, six…hnh?”

For a second it seemed like she was on board with my rakugo allusion, but middle schoolers these days don’t know the original well enough, and she trailed off midway.

Once again Tsukihi was forced to pass.

The dual-straight-women setup didn’t stand a chance, after all.

I gave up on trying to elicit a reply from them and looked at the clocks sitting in my room. Yes, plural. There are four□though none with an alarm function.

I did use to have an alarm clock, until Karen punched right through it with her fist of righteousness and enlightened me that, hot damn, steel can give as easily as newspaper.

Spake the master: “It’s our duty to get our big brother out of bed, no machine will take that away from us!”

It was an odd character trait for a little sister.

My Little Sister Is a Luddite.

Waking me up every morning at the same time means having to wake up even earlier, which wasn't easy. Why would you take it upon yourself like it's your mission in life?

Let's see… Right.

Pretty sure this has been going on since middle school.

They wake me up like this ever since I started middle school…but why? Why do they wake me up?

Is it to recapture some kind of lost familial bond? If so, when was it lost?

With that long-overdue question in the back of my mind, I confirmed, having just woken up, that it was six o'clock. Confirmed that the big hand and the little hand formed a 180-degree angle.

No way it could be evening, so it followed that it was six in the morning and since I hadn't been in cryosleep, today's date was…

"February thirteenth?"

I said it out loud.

Mine is a room with four clocks but no calendar.

I know, I know, how could I be named Koyomi and not have my namesake in my room, but I don't let my name dictate my lifestyle.

After all, what's in a name?

"The day before Valentine's Day. Hey, sisters o' mine, have you finished shopping for all the chocolate you're going to give me?"

"Aaagh," Tsukihi let out a cry of disgust in response to my charming little witticism. She looked at me like I was a vase of dead flowers. "What a disappointing big brother… Brazenly demanding chocolate from your little sisters is just too disappointing. Are you even human? Are you humanity's final stage?"

"What the hell are you talking about? It's only kind of

disappointing.”

“You’ve finally maxed out on your disappointing. That was something that should never be said. Poor big brother. The whole girlfriend thing must be a lie too. Ms. Senjogahara is some extra you hired for a thousand yen an hour.”

“Don’t call Senjogahara an extra. Money doesn’t motivate that woman,” I protested, but upon reflection, she’s pretty hung up on money. A thousand yen an hour would definitely get her moving. Like lightning. Tsukihi, who clearly knew this, wore a triumphant smile. As if to say, He claims to be her boyfriend but doesn’t know shit about her.

Well.

Maybe I don’t know anything.

Maybe I’m profoundly ignorant.

Even if I put that aside, though, ever since I introduced my sisters to Senjogahara, they’ve been thick as thieves□especially Tsukihi, who really jibes with her personality-wise.

Under the circumstances, the chocolate they apparently hadn’t bought for me might be prepped and waiting for Senjogahara.

“Interesting… So the plan is to focus more on the yuri stuff, huh? That shows some business acumen.”

“What’re you talking about, big brother? Yuri? Is that someone’s name? Plus, if it’s about business acumen, pivoting toward BL would be a better idea.”

Tsukihi was cooking up some fiendish scheme.

As befits the brains of the Fire Sisters.

Maybe even overcooking it.

“Come on, big brother,” Karen taunted, “this is no time for you to be worrying about Valentine’s Day. Is it? Is it? You like that?”

She started stomping me. I remained in my sexy cat pose—or was continuing my morning calisthenics routine, so she was grinding her heel into my back as she spoke.

“Only one more month until your college entrance exams. You realize that, right? Do you realize that if you don’t realize that, you’d be better off dead? I’ll kill you myself.”

“What? You’ve got no right to talk to me like that, let alone kill me?”

Though that said, it was indeed exactly one month until March thirteenth, the day when Koyomi Araragi would at last face his college entrance exams.

Happily, I hadn’t been culled by the national exam right out of the gate—considering what was going on at the time, it was nothing short of a miraculous outcome. Though I prefer to think of it as the outcome of my hard work. In either case, it was a close shave as these things go, of course, and when I took a step back, it regrettably seemed like I’d raised the bar for myself…

“Fer chrissakes, this is why you’ll never be anything but trash,” Karen said, crossing her arms.

What a word to use—you see it often in manga and whatnot, but rarely hear people in real life call another living, breathing person trash.

“You can’t even see what you have to do. You can’t see even a month down the line, all you can see is tomorrow, whatever’s staring you right in the face. Your eyes are closed, squeezed shut, you’ve got no prospects for the future. You plan to live like that? You’re in such a sorry state, you probably couldn’t even manage to off yourself. And even if you do get into college, what then? Just thinking about it kills me. It’s quite an achievement to hand me my ass like that, goodwill handassador.”

“Goodwill handassador…”

I think I might be the only person on earth to have been abused in

that particular fashion. We were both third-years, the difference between middle and high school notwithstanding, but Lady Karen, who was in an escalator system and didn't need to do any studying to speak of to get into a high school, was having a grand old time looking down on me.

She already did, purely in terms of height (and unbelievably, the girl was still growing! She wasn't just taller than me, she was on her way to being taller than everyone), but looking down on me metaphorically as well?

This went well past giving me a complex and ended up being kind of pleasurable. Trampled upon by my towering little sister, who'd also stomp my whole approach to life into the ground. With my youngest sister watching, no less…

"Now, get up and get studying. Put a little pressure on yourself."

"It's definitely time for a little pressure, but I don't know about putting myself in a corner… If you aren't careful, you might get held back too. You sure you should be worrying about me?"

I twisted myself and, in my new posture, grabbed hold of the foot that was grinding into me. This goes without saying given her height, but Karen's feet are pretty huge. Almost too huge to wrangle, even with both hands.

"There! I'm gonna tickle you. How's that!"

"Hahaha, it won't work. I've been training, so the skin on the soles of my feet is nice and thick."

"There! Then I'm licking you. How's that!"

"Hiiiik!"

To protect our privacy as siblings, I won't reveal if I managed to lick her foot before she could pull it away, but in any case, she did withdraw it. I was granted freedom of action, and got out of bed.

At this point I was well and truly awake.

Fully and completely.

I'm a weak-willed person who falls back to sleep if I'm not careful, but thanks to the interference of my little sisters, I completely missed my second window for a snooze. My kindly wake-up crew seemed to have noticed because Karen nodded in satisfaction.

"Our work here is done."

From her airs you'd think she'd accomplished a momentous task when all she'd done was wake up her big brother.

Karen has impressive powers of self-affirmation.

"'Kay then, I'm gonna go running. I'm going 'na run. Make sure a bath is ready for me. A scalding one. Wanna come with me, big brother?"

"You know I can't keep up with you. Running means a hundred-meter dash to you and for the length of a marathon, 42.195 kilometers. Get Kanbaru to go with you."

"I actually cross paths with her sometimes this time of day."

"Oh yeah?"

Come to think of it, my dearly beloved junior does two ten-kilometer dashes every morning, doesn't she? Not quite a marathon, but almost half of one. So statistically, it would make sense for her to cross paths with Karen… They're different types so maybe it's like comparing apples and oranges, but which of them wins out in the stamina department?

"So long, big brother. I'm sure you'll be terribly lonely while I'm gone, but see you again at the breakfast table. If I don't, you're going to be tried in absentia."

"What the hell for?"

Well.

A few things did come to mind.

I'd be lucky if I end up dressed like an inmate rather than some bagged game.

"Bye now, Pops big bro!"

With this parting line, which I could at least tell was an impression, though the resemblance to Lupin the Third was so faint it could have just been a coincidence, Karen left at a run. Whether it's jogging or a hundred-meter dash or a marathon, I'm pretty sure she's the only person who gets up a head of steam while she's still inside the house.

She's the jersey girl, after all, so she doesn't even need to change.

I considered coining a term, jerl, but doubted it'd catch on.

"Her hair's gotten long," Tsukihi said, watching Karen depart, and now alone with me in my room. "Super long, really. I was pretty surprised when she severed her ponytail over the summer. But it's pretty much grown back now. Super back, really. When kids grow fast, I guess their hair grows fast too?"

"Yeah, seems like it…"

Severed made it sound like it was a lizard's tail or something, which was a little scary but not inaccurate, and either way, Karen's ponytail had recovered well enough. Even if it wasn't exactly the same, it was long enough to be pulled into a short tail.

"Though it doesn't grow as fast as yours, kiddo."

"Or yours, kiddo," countered Tsukihi.

"Don't call me kiddo, kiddo."

It was immature of me to invoke my authority as a big brother, but in any case, Tsukihi's hair and my own were bizarrely long now.

She'd always been fickle about her hairstyle, but whatever she was thinking or feeling, for a while now she'd been letting her hair grow and grow□it was almost long enough to reach down to her ankles because she wore it straight.

Combined with her taste for traditional Japanese clothes, she looked like some lady ninja who used her hair as a weapon. Kunoichi Tsukihi.

Tsukikage.

As for me myself, I'd originally grown out my hair to hide my "neck," but approximately a year after the events of that hellish spring break, it was pretty damn long even if it wasn't down to my ankles. The tips brushed the middle of my back, and I could probably sport a ponytail that rivaled Karen's old one.

After putting off the matter over and over again□I'll cut it next time, I'll cut it tomorrow, I'll cut it at some point so no need to do it today□it had gotten pretty crazy.

Batshit.

"Never mind me, big brother, don't you think you should cut your hair before exam time? It won't make a great impression in interviews."

"What interviews? There aren't any for college entrance exams. It's not a part-time job. Though I guess there is the impression you make on the examiner. Dammit, yeah, there's that. I'm not even growing it out because I want to. In fact I'd like to cut it, but this is how I look in the photo I submitted with my application form, and if I cut it now they might not recognize me," I said, touching my relatively bedhead-free hair. "I'll cut it off after exams. The whole mop of it."

"Makes me feel hot just looking at it, even though it's winter."

"Look who's talking. Yours isn't hair, it's a trench coat…hmm."

I reached out and mussed her hair for no particular reason. So much hair. It's no good blaming things on other people, but I dunno, Tsukihi's being that long must have numbed my senses. It's like that thing, that optical illusion where you put two lines next to each other and try to tell which one's longer.

Okay, her hair was easily twice as long…

“All right…guess I’ll go get the bath ready for Karen,” I said. “Up with the sun, giving up my precious time, I’ll spur on these old bones to go prepare her bath.”

“I’m sure she’s grateful, but not as full of greatness as you are, big brother.”

“While she’s been tempering her body like it’s a katana, I keenly observe that she doesn’t seem to have joined any school clubs.”

Karen Araragi is a karate girl.

Nowadays they’re called karate dames (nowadays?).

So you’d think she’d be a member of the karate club, or some other athletic club… As someone who’d never had a lick of interest in what my little sisters did, I’d hardly wondered or even conceived of the question, but now all of a sudden it was on my mind.

“Karen can’t join any clubs. Geez, big brother, you really don’t know anything, do you? Do you?”

Tsukihi looked smug.

She was a kind person insofar as she liked to tell you things you didn’t know, but despite that caveat, her attitude was unpleasant.

Well, she always rubbed me the wrong way, and afterwards I would beat her black and blue, but first I wanted to know why Karen couldn’t join any clubs. What was the deal?

“Why can’t Karen join any clubs? This is totally the first I’ve heard of it. That’s no good, I need to know everything about my sisters. Has she been blacklisted? It couldn’t possibly be because she’s too busy with the Fire Sisters.”

If that was it, I’d have to put the kibosh on their activities right away. It’d be a splendid excuse.

“No, no. It’s a rule at her dojo. The students there are forbidden from participating in clubs. Because they’re a combat-oriented school. Because they’re an ultra combat-oriented school. Because

they're a school. Because."

"…? I don't really get it?" I cocked my head. "You're my little sister too, so explain it in a way your big brother can understand, fool. You Le Fou."

"That's a hell of an attitude… My attitude is horrible too, but yours is the worst. It's horribly horrible. Unreal. Just listen for once, okay? If you've attained a belt in a martial art or have a pro boxing license, don't they say it's like you're carrying a deadly weapon? This is the same."

"Ah… I guess they do say that."

Hmmm.

I've also heard that's just a rumor, but I understood why Karen couldn't join any clubs. Basically it was against the rules of her dojo.

A combat-oriented school.

An ultra combat-oriented school.

It wasn't at all clear to me what that all-too-vague expression really meant, but having personally experienced the karate techniques at our sister's disposal, I was prepared to agree. If Karen employed them in society at large, the whole power balance was liable to crumble.

For my part, at least, I didn't want to face an opponent who could pierce a magazine with her fingertips□the only people who would were probably those with the same skill, in other words her dojo mates.

"But now that you mention it, I did hear something about that. I forgot because I don't give a shit about my little sisters."

"Really? After all that?"

"And now I remember…I've been wanting to meet her sensei. Got to tie up those loose plot threads. I'm pretty sure that's the last of

them, too.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re dead wrong…”

“But it kind of feels like a waste, doesn’t it? It’s kind of, what, a shame for Karen’s strength, the power of that body, her physical might, not to be shared openly and to stay buried amidst the Fire Sisters’ illegal activities.”

“Our activities aren’t illegal,” Tsukihi insisted, but I ignored her.

They weren’t treated as crimes only because the two of them were still in middle school. The activities themselves by and large exceeded the bounds of anything that could be called lawful.

They were out of bounds.

Not to mention, what they exacted wasn’t even justice in my view, but there was no exhausting that argument with my sisters; even if I exhausted my strength the argument wouldn’t be, so I decided to let it go at that.

But even if I benevolently let them ramble on about justice and the significance of their work and blah blah blah, the Fire Sisters business got me in a complaining mood.

“You don’t think it’s a shame, Tsukihi? For Karen’s abilities to remain hidden?”

“Nya?”

“That girl’s got talent coming out of her ears, no question, even if she’s not up to my level. Look, don’t you think that deserves to be in the spotlight? I don’t want her to be held back by her dojo or the Fire Sisters, she should be going for Olympic owwww!”

Tsukihi had stepped on my foot.

And not in a cute way, she’d crushed the nail of my little toe with her heel. A surgical strike, dead on target. “Crushed” is neither excessive nor exaggerated, but the truth□she split my toenail, for crying out loud.

“What the hell?!”

“Huh? You were being annoying, big brother…” She looked at me blankly, her sudden flare of emotion seemingly already cooled. She wasn’t regretting her own behavior one bit. “No one, not even our big brother, can be allowed to annul the bond of the Fire Sisters.”

“Wha… You were considering disbanding the Fire Sisters yourself, weren’t you? Didn’t you say you’d invite me to a farewell party chock full of middle school girls?”

“Hearing someone else say it makes me angry.” At least she was honest, this hazardous, dangerous little sister of mine. “The Olympics? They make me sick. The same stale thing over and over again, every time.”

“Tradition isn’t stale. Don’t call a festival held once every four years stale. Don’t be giving it a thumbs-down. Who do you think you are, anyway?”

“Anyway, Karen will retire from the Fire Sisters someday, but I don’t need my big brother to tell me that,” Tsukihi said, this time with total composure. A tough nut to crack, how vexing. “All kinds of stuff will happen when she goes to high school. All kinks of kinds. Her environment will change. I still don’t think she’ll give up the dojo. She’s so besotted with her sensei, and all.”

“Huh…”

Funny.

Hearing that my little sister was besotted with a stranger I didn’t know anything about was sort of unsettling. Tying up loose plot threads aside, I needed to check out this sensei. For my own peace of mind.

“And I bet they won’t let Karen go that easily, either,” Tsukihi predicted. “Her sensei has an even higher estimation of our sister’s physical abilities than you do.”

“Pardon me? An even higher estimation, you say? Bullshit, this so-called sensei doesn’t know a damn thing about the delicate softness

of Karen's tongue."

"Um, probably not… And how do you know how soft her tongue is?" Tsukihi glared at me. "Why are you even familiar with the charms of Karen's oral cavity?"

"Mrgh."

Yikes, time to retreat.

She had me there.

Either way, it was all just idle chatter, and I had no illusions about settling Karen's future in the course of a morning's trifling chat. Just learning that Tsukihi was still ready and willing to disband the Fire Sisters, that she hadn't forgotten that conversation, was more than enough to satisfy me.

Well, I didn't know how my exams would fall out, or maybe fall flat, but either way, there was no question that before too long my environment was going to change even more than Karen's.

But before that happened.

I was, in fact, not totally devoid of a brotherly desire to set Karen and Tsukihi on something like the right path□because yes, it was about time.

For the Fire Sisters to wake up.

For me to.

003

Whether out of kindness or out of habit, or maybe a desire to harass and feel superior to their older brother, or for no reason at all, my two wretched little sisters Karen and Tsukihi Araragi, known to the world as the Tsuganoki Second Middle Fire Sisters, wake me up every morning. They wake me up in the morning like I walk the night. They wake me up regardless of whether it's a weekday or a Sunday or a holiday, almost like it's their occupation, like their life depends on it.

Sure, there have been times when I lashed out at them in annoyance (mostly when I was a freshman, I think), but on this one point they remained undaunted. Whatever horrid miseries I might treat them to, whatever silent treatment, still they woke me up. It bordered on obsession.

Lately, though, by which I mean for a while now, I'd been studying for my college entrance exams, which sometimes kept me up late into the night, and on such occasions I was grateful for their morning "wake-up call"—honestly I'm grateful even now. In fact, when I think back, I should always have been grateful.

And now I'm even grown up enough to admit it.

It's just that as a high school senior in my last term, I didn't really need to show up at school anymore, which meant that there was no need for me to wake up so early… A consistent amount of sleep was necessary to maintain both my performance and my health, but no need to be so hung up on waking up early per se. Considering that I'd been receiving their constant blessing for the past six months or so, however, I couldn't really tell them to get lost. I mean, even if I did tell them to get lost they definitely wouldn't, and it's not just about exam prep. Since it was the Fire Sisters whom I have to thank for rescuing me from the peril of potentially not graduating due to the number of absences, tardies, and early departures I racked up

during the second half of my first year and the beginning of my second, I really couldn't tell them to get lost. Leaving aside justice and all that, their unswerving dedication to waking me up constituted a meritorious service I could not ignore.

Without question, I owe Tsubasa Hanekawa and Hitagi Senjogahara for my scholastic improvement on the road to entrance exams, but equally indisputably, Karen and Tsukihi Araragi are to thank for supporting me on the road to graduation—and it's only human nature to want to repay that debt in some small way.

Only human.

Just to be clear, it has nothing to do with me being into my little sisters.

That kind of thing only exists in manga (how many times now have I said that?).

In fact it's what they call "the reciprocity principle" in psychology—that's definitely what it is. Apparently, human beings have this "quirk" of wanting to repay a person from whom they've received some kind of favor.

Take this fact in isolation, and you might get the impression that human beings are a fair species, that they possess a spirit of fairness, but reality isn't so pretty. Basically, people just "feel shitty when they owe somebody something."

People want that free and clear feeling of paying back a debt, or of feeling superior by paying it back and then some—that seems to be the gist of it.

Which is exactly why I felt it was about time I repaid my debt to Karen and Tsukihi after six months—no, six years of being woken up by them.

As an older brother.

Out of consideration for their futures—

"Karen's got her strength and her looks, though, so even if I don't

give it too much attention, she'll make something of herself… I can leave her alone and she'll be somebody, but…" I grumbled as I went downstairs.

The walls have ears, the doors have eyes, and the shadows have vampires in them.

I couldn't be sure no one was eavesdropping on me so I didn't finish my thought, but yeah, I was worried about Tsukihi.

Tsukihi Araragi.

I'm genuinely worried about her future.

I have to care.

I have to be careful.

I can't even imagine what she'll be up to this time next year… The wheels are always turning in that head of hers, but she's always turning them for the wrong reasons.

Just spinning her wheels.

It was only thanks to managing the unmanageable mayhem of the Fire Sisters' brawn, that is, the over-engineered weapon of mass destruction known as Karen Araragi, that Tsukihi Araragi paradoxically, or passably, functioned as the Fire Sisters' brains… But with the impending increase in her level of independence, I couldn't imagine what kind of schemes she'd concoct□or rather I didn't want to think about it.

Sure, how she lives her life is her own business, but it's also human nature for me to want to avoid any kind of situation where I would end up mobbed by reporters.

Yes.

Taking all of these things into consideration, my first priority as I faced the prospect of graduation was, it goes without saying, completing my exam prep, but the second was rehabilitating my little sisters, particularly Tsukihi.

I hadn't discussed it yet with my parents, but if I got into college I'd probably be leaving home and if I did, I couldn't bear to leave behind two little sisters like them.

It'd be irresponsible of their big brother, wouldn't it?

Maybe of any human being.

To repeat, I could care less what happens to those two. They can go ahead and live whatever kind of life they please, but I'm going to do what I need to do to avoid any sort of blame down the line.

So, for the time being, I began that day by running a morning bath for Karen, who would inevitably return home drenched in sweat.

I felt triumphant at the prospect of being able to say: No way, I'm not irresponsible, I never shirked my responsibilities, I mean look, I drew a bath for her and everything.

Keheheh.

A hot bath, just the way she likes it, how about that.

But my pseudo-villainous attempt at kindness backfired because the scalding temperature Karen prefers is how I like it too. As I cleaned the room and prepared all the amenities, I got the urge to take a bath myself.

Some of you might wonder what's up with a guy who takes a bath in the morning even when he hasn't gone for a run, but they say a person releases a full cup of sweat during the night. Jogger or not, there's nothing wrong with taking a bath in the morning. And it wasn't just that particular day; while I was studying for exams I often took a shower in the morning to clear my head after I woke (was woken) up.

"…"

Consider this.

The warlords of the Warring States period employed cadres of poison tasters. As a result, the food was all cold by the time it

reached the warlord's mouth, but this serves to illustrate how precious his life was. Our anecdote might be apt to elicit laughter at the expense of the poor warlords, whose overabundance of caution meant they never had tasty meals, but that's totally wrongheaded, that's merely the condescending attitude of a peaceful age. Some poison tasters must have made the ultimate sacrifice, which goes to show just how many more lives were riding on the shoulders of the soldiers' commander, on his wellbeing.

Upon reflection, didn't this mean that if I really wanted to look out for Karen, if I really cared about her welfare and her future, I shouldn't let her take a bath without getting in first and ensuring that there was no danger?

From what I've heard, the bathroom is where the most fatal accidents occur in the supposed safety of our homes, so before letting my sister enter that danger zone when she was back from her run, I needed to confirm its security. I had to taste the bath for poison, so to speak. I had no choice.

And so I decided to get into the bath.

I decided to take a nice, hot bath.

Damn, it's hard being a big brother, forced to take baths against my will for my little sister's sake□but as I quickly began to shed my clothes in the changing room.

"Oh."

Tsukihi appeared.

And she was only half-dressed. In other words, she was half-naked. She must have shed her yukata in the hall before coming into the changing room. Which she did all the time. Just disrobed wherever she pleased. The easy-on-easy-off aspect of traditional Japanese clothing was to blame. And naturally, she never picked up after herself (I did, mostly).

Fixing me with her severest glare, the half-naked Tsukihi accused, "You're the first! I mean, the worst! You said you were getting a

bath ready for Karen but want to get in ahead of her! You're the worst, the worst, the worst, the worst!"

"Um, given your state of undress, I can only surmise that you had exactly the same intention…"

In fact, since she was hoping to hijack a bath that she hadn't even prepared, that I had prepared for Karen, who was the real villain here? Trying to scold me about it on top of that I was seriously concerned about her future.

How had she made it through fourteen years unscathed with her sorry excuse for a personality?

In any case, Tsukihi had a strong metabolism, which meant she sweated easily. She took a bath every chance she got, kind of like Shizuka, to put it in Doraemon terms.

She wasn't about to let this opportunity pass her by.

How shrewd of her.

How shrewd and rude.

"Just stand aside, big brother. I'm getting into that bath, and no one's going to get in my way, brother or not."

"What a line. You're willing to fracture our family over who takes the first bath, and a morning bath at that…"

Frightening.

My sister lived entirely in the moment, didn't she?

"But I've already gotten completely into the bath-time mindset," she said. "My body may be out here, but my spirit is already in there."

"Oh, shut up. The tub's still only half full."

"Don't forget to add my volume to it."

"Like that's something to brag about."

Yet I, myself, was too deep into the bath-time mindset at that point to yield my turn. Well, my heart may not have been in the tub like Tsukihi's, my body and spirit were still there in that changing room, but surrendering the bath without a fight just because my little sister told me to would be a stain upon the honor of big brothers everywhere.

Shoving her out of the way so I could be first might in fact be appropriate, but the alternative was unacceptable. It could only be described as a dereliction of my duty as a big brother.

So I puffed out my chest (I was shirtless by then, incidentally. It was a half-naked sibling standoff) and gave Tsukihi an ultimatum.

"Little sister, if you're determined to get into that bathroom, you'll have to take me down firwatchit!"

I barely managed to dodge the shampoo bottle that she unhesitatingly hurled at me. The cheeky little middle schooler apparently brought her own shampoo. She was at least classier than Karen, who'd happily wash her hair with a bar of soap, but a truly classy person doesn't throw (with a spin, no less) shampoo bottles at other people's faces.

"Tsk."

And classy people don't click their tongues.

But man, was she a frightening little sister.

What was she thinking? Or was she not thinking at all?

"What the hell?! Someone could get hurt!"

"You told me to take you down."

"No, no, I meant mentally. Physically, you don't take me down, you respect me and kneel before me."

"You're a pain in the ass," Tsukihi said, closing the door behind her. She didn't actually lock it, but her meaning was clear: I'm not budging from this spot no matter what. And she started forward to

reclaim her personal bottle of shampoo, which had landed behind me.

And what's more, that motion flowed naturally into a nonchalant attempt to slip past me into the bathroom, so I rushed to block her.

Putting my body on the line, like a real man. Protecting the door to the bathroom as if it hid a gaggle of wounded children.

"You shall not palookout!"

This time she went for the eye-gouge.

An attack the old Senjogahara would have gone for (and did).

At least in Senjogahara's case she was so stubbornly combative because of all the issues she was dealing with. Tsukihi just wanted to get into the bathroom.

"Enough already, big brother, don't get heated. Heating up the bath was enough, your work here is done."

"That's an unspeakable line."

"Move."

"No."

There was no point in being so stubborn, but what kept me standing there was my pride as an older brother, my not wanting to bow before or fall behind my little sister.

Or you could say I was frozen with terror.

I mean, Tsukihi was glaring at me for real.

She wasn't a yandere, but still over yonder in the psycho ward.

When you take away the sweet dere part, all you're left with is the pathology.

"I'm the one who heated up this water, so the first bath is mine by right."

“I allowed you to heat it up for me, and you should be satisfied with your lot.”

Our arguments ran perfectly parallel, never intersecting.

Which is to say it didn’t even constitute an argument.

We weren’t engaging with each other at all; if anything, the first engagement was yet to come, as in a battle.

Somewhere along the line, the premise that I’d prepared the bath for Karen had gotten lost.

In fact, the very existence of Karen, off happily running along somewhere, had vanished from our minds.

While she was enjoying the refreshing morning breeze, an internecine family struggle was unfolding, a sordid sibling rivalry that perhaps rendered her the real winner among the three Araragi children.

Sooner or later, that very Karen would come home from her run and appear in that changing room, ready to cleanse the sweat from her body□she would waltz in there drenched in sweat, dripping with perspiration.

And in that three-way contest, the winner would undoubtedly be her. Circumstantially speaking, she would obviously arrive plenty sweaty enough to warrant a bath by anyone’s standards, and if it came to blows, Tsukihi and I combined couldn’t beat her even if she had one hand tied behind her back.

Indeed, Tsukihi and I were at this impasse because our combat levels were more or less evenly matched. Naturally, I was a boy and had a boy’s strength, but Tsukihi had a crazy streak that I lacked. The craziness to unhesitatingly go for the vitals.

In other words, it was a stalemate.

I couldn’t but envision a future where Karen came in and snatched the prize out from under us while we maintained that equilibrium□and I’m sure Tsukihi saw it too.

My little sister wasn't so oblivious to her actions' consequences that she'd overlook that eventuality—okay, she was oblivious, but her wheels turned quickly. I bet she arrived at that conclusion well before I did. It's just that her emotional brakes were shot, by virtue of which she was only able to deal with the situation on a par with me, who had only just realized the danger.

"All right then, big brother. We'll meet in the middle."

"Meet in the middle?"

A compromise?

Ah ha.

A proposal worthy of a strategist.

They say war is customarily conducted with a middle ground in mind.

But in this case, what middle ground—what point of compromise could exist between us? The right to take the first bath was a one-of-a-kind item, so to speak, and the competition for it a zero-sum game. One person wins, the other loses. So I didn't see any room for compromise, anything to compromise on.

But I underestimated Tsukihi.

Not for nothing had she managed to become the idol of every middle schooler in town despite her boundlessly irritating personality. The Fire Sisters' brains proposed a plan that no ordinary strategist could have conceived of.

"Let's meet in the middle and go in together."

004

We met in the middle.

Somehow I ended up going into the bathroom with Tsukihi.

“Why…”

How come?

How did it come to this?

You could say it was thanks to our mutual stubbornness.

You could. I don’t want to, but you could.

“Whaaat? You don’t want to? Why, does your little sister’s naked body make you think dirty thoughts? No waaay! Baths are for getting clean, big brother.”

Maybe it’s because I was bamboozled by those words. But in the first place, Tsukihi must have offered her compromise on the assumption that I’d lose my nerve and slink out of the changing room with my tail between my legs.

And precisely because I knew she made that assumption, there was no way I was going to slink out of that changing room. Instead I threw down the gauntlet and said, “What, are you all talk, you little brat? Time to put your money where your mouth is. Or don’t you have the guts to go into the bathroom with me, you chickenshit.”

And now here we were.

All in and going all the way.

Me and Tsukihi, brother and sister, seated side by side in the bathroom washing our long hair. I took this rare opportunity to try

out Tsukihi's shampoo, and what do you know, the lather really did feel different.

"…"

"…"

The thing is.

Here's the thing.

Getting two, more or less grown-up siblings into the bathroom together was ten times tougher than I imagined… The room isn't as big as it is in the anime, I mean, it's just the regular size of a bathroom in a normal family home, so with two teenagers in there, it was pretty cramped.

Like, while we were washing our hair we kept banging elbows.

"Big brother."

"What is it, little sister?"

"Say something. This is more awkward than I thought it'd be."

"Yeah…"

You're not wrong, but you don't have to come right out and say it.

Though it takes a certain burden off me if you're the one to bring it up.

It wasn't going to do much for the narrative either if that silence went on forever.

Every once in a while you hear some media personality tell a funny story on television or the radio about being in the bathroom with their parents as a grown woman, but you don't hear much about siblings doing it, it just doesn't happen.

In that sense, Tsukihi and I were delivering a rare piece of reportage in the present progressive, but did anyone ask for rare?

More like well-done.

If it was so awkward, you'd think I might say, "I'm going to get out first, take your time," or that she would say, "I'm about done. Excuse me, big brother," but then this was me and Tsukihi.

On the contrary, I tragically blurted out, "If it's so awkward then get the hell out, Tsukihi. You're just fronting anyway. If you're pissed off at yourself for saying what you said, you shouldn't have said it to begin with."

"You're the one who's pissing in the wind, big brother. All I meant was that it's awkward looking at your scrawny body. I'm cool as a cucumber about being in the bathroom with you. So cool I'm positively frigid."

That was our lamentable exchange.

Someone, please, put us out of our misery.

"Scrawny? I resent that, I'm a lean, mean beefcake machine."

"A lean, mean beefcake machine? Did you mean to say a teeny-weeny beanpole machine?"

"Hey, that's out of order. But listen, Tsukihi, I might consider getting out if you tell me that's what you really want."

"I really, really, really, really want you not to get out," Tsukihi brushed off the concession I had finally forced myself to offer.

What the hell was wrong with her?

She lived just to be stubborn.

"Are you already clean, big brother? Or do you want to get out so soon because you're still feeling dirty?"

"Again? You're going to recycle that joke? When you're the one who's so fascinated by my body? What you really want is to touch these washboard abs, I bet."

“No I don’t, why would I want to touch abs divided into eight like that?”

“You counted them! You counted my abdominal muscles. You’re giving them the eye, aren’t you?”

“You’re the one who’s eyeing your little sister’s boobs, big brother.”

“Yeah right. It’s not like I’ve never seen them before.”

“Isn’t that a little weird? A big brother who’s seeing his little sister’s boobs not for the first time?”

“I’m all about them, I know all about those two hunks of meat.”

“Don’t call them hunks of meat. Don’t talk about a woman’s chest like you’re at a butcher shop.”

“Psh. You don’t have anything to worry about with those melons.”

I must have been rattled by the situation after all, though, because as soon as I said this I realized I’d lost track of what “melons” meant as slang. Did it refer to big breasts or small breasts?

Judging from the huge grin on Tsukihi’s face, probably the former. Dammit, I might as well have sent her a fruit basket along with that one. Or maybe it was just a case of sour grapes.

Not that I know what it is here.

“Though the fact is,” I regrouped.

Again.

“You and Karen happily flounce down the hall half-naked during summer time. Forget half-naked, you’ve got a three-quarters-naked lifestyle. Nudity is one of your essential biogenic needs. So being in the bathroom together is no big thing at all. If there’s a problem, it’s just that we’re a little too close together.”

“That’s exactly the problem. That’s exactly the big problem, isn’t it, big brother? If you came this close to me in the hall in the

summertime, you'd get a taste of my elbow."

"Elbow…" So realistic an attack□in fact our elbows were already touching.

"I'd elbow you even if I were fully dressed."

"Aren't you being a little harsh towards your older brother? But dammit, it really is narrow in here…narrow like a certain someone's mind. Tsukihi, hurry up and finish washing your hair already. I guess I have no choice, I'll cede the right to be first into the tub."

The whole point of the Battle for the First Bath became unclear if I gave up now, but it wasn't about that anymore.

Forget about the bath or being first, simply feeling superior to Tsukihi, my impudent little middle school brat of a sister Tsukihi Araragi, was my goal now. Bringing her to heel.

I wanted to make the girl who, I'm pretty sure, never once thanked me for anything in her life, say: Thank you, big brother.

I wanted to make her express her gratitude to me verbally.

But the more I pressed, the more she resisted. That's Tsukihi for you.

Or rather, her mindset might have been similar to my own here.

"Feh. Shouldn't you be the one, big brother? I'd sooner cede it to you than let you cede it to me. It's a cedar tub, after all."

"Cedar? Isn't it plastic? Quit screwing around and get in there like I told you."

"And I told you that I don't want to."

"Gaaa!"

"Grrr!"

When a battle of wills goes sub-verbal, you know it's all over.

The end of the world.

Our quarrel descended into a fierce clashing of elbows, our elbows as we both washed our hair clashing like sabers—thankfully we were side by side and both facing front, but at this rate we were going to end up six-pack to boobs.

The awkwardness was quelled somewhat by our loud dispute, but the fundamental problem hadn't been dealt with.

This was a wildly immoral, or maybe just plain old distasteful situation.

But here again came clever Tsukihi to the rescue—her wheels really do turn faster than mine.

The plan she proposed: "Listen, big brother, let's wash our hair one at a time. We each have too much hair for us to do it side by side, it's inefficient. Uneconomical."

"I'm pretty sure economics has nothing to do with washing your hair…"

But she was absolutely right in terms of efficiency.

Even she could be right once in a while.

We were using good shampoo and everything, but doing it this way was killing its cost-performance index. Not to mention, the stress was liable to make our hair start falling out.

"But Tsukihi, if side by side is no good, what do we do? When you say we'll wash our hair one at a time, what exactly are you envisioning, logistically speaking?"

"This!!"

Tsukihi leapt up energetically and got behind me. Her tendency to become enthused without warning, written or otherwise, was another element of her peakiness. Her emotions constantly going

from positive to negative to hot to cold also made her nothing but a completely unpredictable pain in the ass, but in any event, she got behind me and thrust her hands into my soapy hair.

“I’m going to wash your hair for you!!”

“That…”

This that was of course an abbreviated form of the expression of surprise that’s crazy, but at the same time, of that answers my question. She was right that trying to wash our hair at the same time in such a confined space was tricky, but if we washed each other’s hair, we’d fit into place like puzzle pieces.

It was like two hostages abducted and stuffed together in a small room, with their hands tied behind their backs, having a hard time untying their own bonds but undoing them with surprising ease once they put themselves back to back.

A real paradigm shift.

Like the Copernican Revolution.

I had to doff my chapeau to Tsukihi, she’d won this round. But…
“What’s a chapeau, anyway?”

“It’s a hat, isn’t it? That you use to hide the bedhead on your absurdly long hair.”

“Stop making things up. I never wore a hat to hide my bedhead.”

“Well, I have.”

“Don’t tip your hand, I don’t want to know your style tips.”

“Scrub-a-dub-duuub,” Tsukihi added sound effects as she lathered up my hair.

She made it seem like they were coming from my head□either she was a fool or she was making a fool out of me, and I almost told her to quit it, but no point in getting myself all in a lather. I gritted my teeth and let it happen.

Mature amid the moisture, humility in the humidity.

“Hmm. I’m feeling oddly superior washing someone’s hair, I like it. Literally holding someone’s most vital organ in your hands is so pleasurable. Holding their life in your hands. Now I know how a hairdresser feels.”

“Don’t go around acting like you understand other people’s feelings, and stop talking such horseshit. Hairdressers don’t think about stuff like that.”

“But if this were a barbershop, you’d get a shave. I’d shave your face with a straight razor, right? Now that’s absolutely a dominance relationship.”

“A dominance relationship, or…”

A relationship based on trust, more like.

But regardless of how she said it, I got what she was saying.

The reverse was also true.

Although holding my life in her hands was an exaggerated way of putting it, trusting someone else with your head and body can be a very pleasurable experience, depending on the context. In the course of our daily lives, we unconsciously guard ourselves against everyone and everything around us□turning off that security system once in a while might carry with it a certain feeling of liberation.

That comes with the caveat that the other person will do you no harm, of course… But a theory that trust is important in interpersonal relationships because it’s connected to a feeling of liberation, or even of pleasure, might hold water.

Then again, my despicable little sister (where’s this justice you supposedly defend?) saw that relationship of trust as dominance.

Though it’s basically true.

Basically true, and basic psychology.

Since total domination of someone, their total reliance on you, is liberating and pleasant□though I've gotten somewhat off track here, and to sum up what was really going on, my little sister was just washing my hair in the morning.

"Hunh," she grunted.

"What's wrong, Shampoocifer?"

"Don't address your little sister like she's the devil! I haven't made you sign anything in exchange of washing your head, have I? Anyway, with my hands on your head like this, giving it a scrub scrub and a rub rub, I'm surprised how teeny-weeny it is."

"Says the littler little sister."

"Yeah right. We're almost the same height now. I feel like I've really been growing."

"How tall do the two of you plan on getting, anyway…"

"Not that I want to get as tall as Karen. Seems tough to be that size. But we're sisters, and I guess I can't help but keep growing, same as Karen. Actually, we were about the same height back in elementary school."

"…"

It was terrifying to contemplate.

Both sisters, taller than me, their older brother… To hell with an older brother's authority and dignity.

My head wouldn't be the only teeny-weeny thing.

"But maybe there's hope," I said. "The hope that I, the older brother, will get as big as Karen yet lies dormant at the bottom of that Pandora's Box."

"I hate to rain on your parade, but you'd better rein in those hopes. Your reign as the tallest one in the family is over for good."

“Don’t crush my dreams with a triple homophone, Tsukihi, don’t dump out Pandora’s Box. Because I’m warning you, if you ever get taller than me, I’ll make you a head shorter again even if it means I have to lop off your feet.”

“That’s horrifying. That amounts to a death threat.”

“Ridiculous. Can’t you divine the brotherly compassion in my threat, you little turd? I could’ve said I’d make you a foot shorter by lopping off your head.”

“You could’ve, my ass.”

She twisted my neck.

I’d forgotten that she held my life in her hands.

“C’mon, I’ll preserve your severed feet in my room,” I offered.

“You keep getting more grotesque. Extra grotesque.”

“Extra, huh?”

“The fact is if I stood my hair straight up, I could crush you and even Karen right now. It’d be a landslide.”

“If you stood all that hair on end, you’d look like a monster. It’d take some serious gel. But your hair’s about as long as your body, so it’s a simple calculation: you’d be twice as tall, right?”

“Yup.”

“I’d say so long to a little sister like that.”

“Hm? Did you say something?”

“You heard me fine!”

Even if she didn’t stand it on end, with hair down to her ankles she looked every inch, every foot, every mile a monster. While I’ve seen illustrations of girls with hair like that in manga, it’d be genuinely scary in real life.

But its fear factor aside, I'd witnessed any number of epic fails where Tsukihi tripped over her own hair.

Don't fail in front of someone preparing for exams! Such bad luck…

I definitely found myself thinking just cut it already, but I'm sure she simply hadn't found the right opportunity, same as me.

"At the risk of repeating myself, though, your hair grows insanely fast."

"Not as fast as yours, big brother. Not nearly. You only started growing it this year, there's no way it could grow that much normally. What's your secret?"

"There's no secret to growing out your hair. It's just… My metabolism might be even better than yours."

To be precise.

My metabolism□sped up after spring break.

"Okay, let's stand it up," Tsukihi said, beginning to play with my hair.

Making shapes with the foam and molding it to look like Astro Boy's.

"Awesome. Astro Bro. Super Sibling."

"Trying to make me sound like a Super Saiyan."

"Rinse time!" Tsukihi grabbed the handheld showerhead and flushed all the shampoo out of my hair. And she didn't neglect to throw in a little head massage, like a real hairdresser.

Maybe all that time spent at the salon, back when she was constantly changing her hairstyle, had rubbed off on her.

Next came the conditioner.

This was from Tsukihi's private stash as well.

Though when I think about it, she'd only be able to wash all that hair about three times before the bottle was empty… Her metabolism might've been good, but it got terrible mileage.

"Ooh, this conditioner is like wax, so now we can really shape your hair. Teehee, it's like you've got a pompadour!"

"Hey, quit playing around with my head… In fact, quit doing everything you're doing."

Not that I could see what was going on up there.

Something dreadful, I was pretty sure.

"Heheh. Now I'll wash your body for you." Paying no heed to anything I said, Tsukihi picked up the family bottle of body soap that's always in the bathroom. Squirting out an appropriate amount and working it into a lather, she suddenly exclaimed, "Oh! Big brother, big brother!"

"Why the hell are you shouting like you clearly must've figured out something."

"A hilarious gag just came to me."

"As if. You're setting me on edge."

The adjective hilarious doesn't sound right with the term gag in the first place. That might come off kind of insulting to people who stake their livelihood on them, but gags are fundamentally more about the energy of the delivery than about actually being funny.

"C'mon, c'mon, look over here, look over here."

"What is it?"

I turned my head and looked over my shoulder like she asked me to.

In other words, without a shred of embarrassment or anything else, my little sister was demanding that I look at her naked… The way she'd said it was so natural that, naturally, I obeyed, but was that

okay?

It was not.

It was not, not, not okay.

My little sister was posing naked for me.

Sitting with her knees up and both hands clasped behind her head. And with the body soap she'd lathered up so thoroughly in her palms dolloped across her chest, her crotch, and her thighs.

"I call it, The Metropolitan Ordinance."

"Yikes!"

Leave out the satire!

In a panic I grabbed the hand basin, scooped some water out of the tub, and splashed it on her. Off came the soap bubbles. That might be even worse Metropolitan Ordinance-wise, but contriving to hide the naughty bits is much more objectionable in this sort of situation, in my humble opinion.

Full frontal is more wholesome, and more artistic.

"What are you dooooing?!" she complained.

"What are you doing, you mean!"

"Wait…maybe sticking up my hands and calling it The Skytree is better, less direct?"

Tsukihi adopted just such a pose.

She'd said something back in the changing room about her volume, and it did seem like she'd been working on her weight, but the reality is that she just wasn't prone to plumpness. So when she stretched her body vertically like that, her ribs were clearly visible, and she did look kind of like the Skytree.

"But if you're really going for the Skytree, you should stick your

hair up. It's supposedly over six hundred meters tall."

"Yaaaah. Though my hair won't actually reach that high. In which case, maybe Karen should be the one to do it."

"Hmm…"

In fact, Karen might manage to be convincing.

However.

"Tsukihi, actually, Karen's boobies are just as enormous as you'd expect for someone of her height, and on a tower, that sort of uneven surface spells danger□!"

Tsukihi unleashed a kick at me there in the danger zone of the bathroom, if you can believe it. And a high kick to boot, aimed at my throat. Her retorts, a.k.a. her attacks, are unleashed silently and without warning, making them truly murderous.

"Quit critiquing your little sisters' boobs. No side-by-side comparisons!"

"Huh. I guess you're right. My bad. But even if it was my bad, you're crazy if you think I'm going to apologize so easily."

"That's a hell of an attitude… Listen, I'm going to wash your body now, so face that way. Scrub-a-dub-duuub."

"That sound effect makes you sound a lot more childish than you think… Come up with something that makes you seem a little more cultured."

"Fine, abababababa."

"Is that a Ryunosuke Akutagawa reference??"

Though that story title kind of wrecks the image of him as a literary giant.

At least, it's not very refined.

“Was that the right number of ba’s?” I asked.

“Of course. Of course it was. Look it up if you want to,” came Tsukihi’s supremely self-confident reply from over my shoulder, as she poured water down my back.

But it was unusual for her self-confidence to match the facts, which is to say she had a tendency to act self-confident only when she wasn’t, so her attitude suggested a high probability that she’d gotten it wrong.

“Ababa. Abababababa. Abababababababaaaa!”

And indeed, while she scrubbed my back, Tsukihi tried to hedge her bets by saying it a bunch more times with varying numbers of ba’s.

“At any rate, don’t be such a slacker,” I scolded. “Don’t wash me with your hand like that, use that sponge and put a little elbow grease into it.”

“But scrubbing with your hand lets you really clean all the hard-to-reach spots. And using grease when I’m trying to get you clean? Wait, hang on a sec, is being touched by your little sister getting you all hot and bothered, big brother? You naughty boy, I’ll never let you live this one down!”

“Just watching your thrilling, moment-to-moment, stopgap way of life bothers me plenty…”

“Teeheehee, I’ll wash between your toes for you. Think you can stay calm?”

“Thrilling…”

For better or for worse (mostly for worse), she only thinks about the immediate situation.

She only brings her smarts to bear on what just happened and what’s just about to happen.

It felt pointless to try and tell her to consider her future, to focus on what was coming a little further down the line… You know what

they say, you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. Or, given that she was already perfectly aware of anything I might say to her, maybe this was about beating a dead one. Even Karen, a runaway train who never thought anything through, had slightly better prospects.

But I'm sure Tsukihi didn't want to hear that from a guy who hadn't even tried to get out of ending up in the bathroom with his little sister… Hmmm.

"Okay, all clean! Sparkling! Like you've been shellacked! Switch!"

"Switch?"

"Duh. It's your turn to wash my hair now, obviously."

"Grk… You set me up, you bastard."

A reciprocity clause.

Sure, maybe it should've been obvious, maybe it was inevitable, but having it dropped on me after the fact filled me with a sense of defeat. Refusing, though, meant promptly exiting the bathroom, so I had no choice but to fall in line with Tsukihi's scheme and wash her hair.

Dammit.

Forced to wash my little sister's hair—how humiliating… I considered a plot to pay her back by doing it with body soap, but the bottle might get shoved down my throat if she found out, so I let that one go.

It would be too pitiful, on both our accounts.

Nothing for it, I'd wash my little sister's hair like a mature adult.

And so we switched spots.

On the surface, abandoning our attempts to wash in tandem and washing each other's hair one at a time instead was paying off—but in reality not so much. For two people with hair as long as ours to

shampoo in succession took a commensurately long time, and as a result neither of us had managed to make it into the tub, when competing to be the first one in there was the whole reason we were sharing the room.

We weren't just washing each other's hair, we were getting in it.

I'm sure there's some perfect aphorism to describe our predicament, but it's not coming to me.

"But maaan, you really do have a shit ton of hair, Tsukihi… Actually hefting it like this, you know, it's almost more like cloth than hair."

"Cloth?"

"Cloth for a kimono. It weighs a ton. It's super heavy, maybe it's all the water it's soaking up."

"Oh."

"What?"

"I figured it out, little Tsukihi figured it all out. Lately I keep thinking I've been getting fat, but no matter how much I diet I haven't been able to lose any weight. It was my hair all along."

"Now I see…that you're a complete idiot. Gimme a break and cut it already. Though I'm sure you just haven't found a chance. Well, I'll cut it for you right now, if you want. I'll snip it all off for you. Come on, it's not like it's the first time I've cut a girl's hair."

"I don't know the details, but that's a hell of a backstory they've given you… No, leave it alone. Leave it leave it leave it. Because I'm making a wish with it."

"A wish?"

"Not a whish, got it? A wish."

"Yeah, I get it…"

What was this all about?

So it wasn't that she just hadn't found a chance, she had a real reason for letting her hair grow that long? Unexpected. That someone like Tsukihi Araragi, who lives only in the present, would do something so forward-looking.

True, given that she used to change her hairstyle every month, I probably should've realized something was up the second she started letting it grow out.

A shameful failing as an older brother.

"Huh, okay. Well, what are you wishing for? Spill it."

"Not a chance. I can't. If I tell you, my wish won't be granted."

"Oh yeah? I guess they do say wishes won't come true if you tell them to other people… But it's fine, don't be such a stickler, your older brother's a special case. Tell me."

"You don't get to act like a big brother only at times like this."

"Hmmm. In any case, look at all this hair…"

I'd given it a shot, but the truth was that I wasn't all that interested in why she was growing out her hair, so I returned my focus to the hair itself.

Crap.

There was so much hair I couldn't even work up a lather.

No scrub-a-dub-dub sound effect.

I couldn't bear it if that got ascribed to a lack of skill on my part□I never had much of a way with shampoo to begin with, but what a sorry situation for an older brother to find himself in, after Tsukihi managed to work up such a lather.

On behalf of the older brothers of the world, I couldn't let my position slip any further.

“Looks like there’s not enough shampoo… You want to talk about uneconomical, this hair is it. Your special shampoo is a terrible waste. Though I guess since you don’t have to go to the salon, maybe you actually come out ahead. With a little pocket money, even.”

“But I do go to the salon.”

“What?”

“Unlike you, I’m not just letting my hair grow wild… I have to keep the ends even and stuff.”

“Really, when no one ends up giving a stuff about your hair?”

“Don’t get snippy. Your words cut deep. Don’t forget, it was the repetition of cruel words like those that gave birth to me and Karen’s twisted brand of justice.”

“You’re calling your own justice twisted?”

Oh.

When I added about twice as much shampoo, even Tsukihi’s ginormous mane started to lather up nicely. It also looked like she had even more hair than she already did.

“Heeheehee. Latherrr, more latherrr. This is actually fun, a guy could get used to washing people’s hair. I have to say, makes even a cool guy like me feel all bubbly.”

“You’re having to say it? Sounds like you’re going to pop.”

“Makes me wanna bury myself in all this hair. To be bound hand and foot in your hair.”

“That’s a little too kinky. I’d flee this bathroom at top speed. I’d be willing to accept defeat.”

“You washed my body with your hands and fingers; I want to wash your body with this hair.”

“Don’t, you’ll damage it. I’ll end up with a ton of split ends. Just its length makes it a lot more susceptible to wear and tear. If you’re going to do it, at least use your own hair.”

“I bet if you wrapped yourself in all this hair, you could walk down the street totally naked. No one would know.”

“And why would li’l miss Tsukihi ever want to walk down the street naked?”

“Hmmm.”

As I was washing her hair, it just naturally transitioned into a head rub. I was massaging her scalp. Now I understood what she meant about holding someone’s life in your hands. Now I saw why she liked it.

It does give you a full-on sense of superiority.

“It’s amazing feeling so above you like this… Straight up amazing, it’s the tops. Like your head might come right off if I gave it a little twist.”

“That hadn’t occurred to me.”

“Rubbing your head gets me even more excited than fondling boobs.”

“That’s scary. And rude.”

“Fondle fondle fondle fondle.”

“Keep your perverse feelings out of my head rub. Or at least cap the sound effect at scrub-a-dub-dub. Sad as I am to admit, though the shampooing wasn’t much to speak of, this head massage is actually pro-quality pleasant.”

“Mm-hmm,” I replied smugly.

Then again, that didn’t seem like a skill with broader applications. No matter how things shake out, I doubt a future as a hairstylist is waiting for me.

And I can't think of any other line of work where you rub other people's heads.

"Okay, time for the condition…er?"

"What's wrong, big brother?"

"There's not nearly enough. Mister Conditioner is nearly empty."

"Whaaat?!"

Tsukihi flipped out.

You might even say she was flippant.

Well actually, you can't.

She flipped out but whatever amount the bottle still contained had been used up by none other than Tsukihi, to wash my hair. It wasn't something I, the beneficiary, should blithely say, but I said it anyway: "Your fault." Easily, unambiguously: "You should've checked first."

"I don't care whose fault it is. I think we can all agree that what's important here is that my hair is going to be a mess? That PreCure is going to die?"

"PreCure is going to die? That is a big deal."

For a moment I couldn't figure out what she'd meant to say, but it had to be cuticle. Not even close! But then, there was a character called Cure Cool or something, wasn't there…

"In any case," I said, "the point is that Smile PreCure! was a good show."

"That wasn't the point at all?"

"The theme was smiling, so all the heroines did their best to keep smiling even when they wanted to cry. It was awesome."

"I don't want to hear about your fetishes, big brother. I don't care

about your smile fetish. Just let a smile be a smile."

"Then there's Kenji Miyazawa."

"What? Quit changing the subject."

"Kenji Miyazawa asked his students what the longest word in the English language was, and the answer was 'smiles.' Because there's a mile between the first s and the second one."

"So true. I hope he got some good smileage out of it, too. Pretty funny guy, this Miyazawa-san."

"Don't call our great poet 'Miyazawa-san.' Show some respect."

"I said 'san,' didn't I?"

"Which oddly sounds too familiar… It's strange, huh, that adding 'san' sometimes feels more intimate, not less."

"Definitely. With Miyazawa-san, dropping the honorific actually feels more respectful. What's that all about… Seems like it'd be interesting to try and figure out the criteria for that."

"Maybe, but it might just have to do with whether or not you know them personally, and whether or not they're still alive…" As I said this, I turned on the showerhead and rinsed the lather out of Tsukihi's hair. "Okay, all finished. Now let's wash that body. With your hair."

"Were you even listening?" Tsukihi's temper flared and she blurted out the first retort that came to her: "What are you trying to do to this hair of hair? Ruin it?!"

"Hair of hair?"

"Head of hair!! Mane! My beautiful tresses!" she shrieked in my face.

Her delivery lacked a certain je ne sais quoi, was wanting in panache.

“But what choice do we have,” I demanded to know. “We’re out of conditioner, and I want to wash your body with your own hair.”

“The second one is just your preference! We definitely have a choice!”

“Hmph. Well, when you put it like that, I can’t deny it. You’re a perspicacious one, I’ll give you that. Tsukihercule Poirot.”

“Just put something on it! Anything!”

“Hm. That gives me an idea.”

I removed the cap of the virtually empty conditioner bottle and used the showerhead to spray in a small amount of hot water.

Then, replacing the cap, I shook the bottle, for all the world like a classy bartender. To get it properly mixed.

In my mind I was wearing a vest.

“What’re you doing, big brother?”

“Well, the bottle may be ‘empty,’ but there’s got to be some conditioner still stuck to the walls, and watering it down should supplement it enough to cover your hair just this once.”

“Stop it, that’s something a poor person would do.”

“A poor person?!”

To hear that kind of bourgeois talk coming from my own sister… I was shocked. I couldn’t believe my ears, when had she become so arrogant? But then I realized she’d always been that way. No doubt about it.

I guess anyone could have inferred that aspect of her since she’d gotten an obviously expensive conditioner to use just for herself.

“I’d rather let my hair take its course, and end up looking like a Super Saiyan, than act like a pauper,” she sniffed. “I’m me, after all.”

“Hrmm.”

My little sister, soon to be a middle school third-year, had gotten a Super Saiyan confused with a Great Ape. Stands to reason that kind of game of telephone would happen across the generations.

But then again, there’s Dragonball GT, where Super Saiyans can achieve a further transformation thanks to the power of the moon. So maybe she was just an obsessively knowledgeable Dragonball fanatic.

“The stuff’s going to mix with the water that’s already been absorbed by your hair, so it’s just a question of timing,” I reasoned with her.

“Don’t call my fancy conditioner ‘stuff.’ Don’t talk about my ’ditioner that way.”

“Look, it’s not as watered down as you think. I just added a few air bubbles, it’s a fantastic conditioner. ’Ditioner.”

I took off the cap again and squirted some of the hot water/conditioner mixture into my hand to show her. She knit her eyebrows as she peered at it, then hung her head and said, “I suppose I have no choice. I’ll let you save face this time, big brother.”

The hanging her head part was purely physical, though; she was just trying to make it easier for me to apply the conditioner.

Putting up her hair, or putting up with her, I resumed my task.

I’d hoped to get enough for one go-around by diluting the conditioner, but it was easier said than done, given the full shock of Tsukihi’s hair□I had to be very careful about how I applied what I had.

I had to be deliberate beyond deliberate.

Deliberate like a lacquerware artisan applying gold leaf.

“Hrmm… Hey, Tsukihi. I don’t mean to nag, and I don’t know what

your wish is all about, but how about at least cutting your bangs?”

“If I’m half-hearted about it, the ends would poke me in the eyes. And no matter how tenderly you care for it, there’s no way to achieve hair that doesn’t hurt when it gets in your eye.”

“I see…”

I didn’t.

“But that kind of question is a boomerang, big brother, you know? Your bangs are plenty long too, so right back at you.”

“For some reason mine don’t bother me.”

“Speaking of bangs,” Tsukihi said suddenly as I massaged her scalp “Nadeko’s out of the hospital.”

“Yeah? Glad to hear it.”

“Hm? You’re not as excited as I expected. I thought you’d do a little dance of glee.” Tsukihi turned around a little to look at me. Her expression was sincere. “A naked dance of glee.”

“As if.”

“I thought it’d be a cinch to get you to do a naked dance. I specifically waited until we were in the bathroom to tell you and everything.”

“Don’t add some frivolous rider to such a serious subject.”

“Yessir. Anyway, she’s out.”

“Huh.”

Huh.

What else could I say? What else did I have the right to say?

I was certainly glad she was out of the hospital, though.

Not that I could ever face Sengoku again

But I was glad anyway.

Somehow I was able to be.

“Big brother?”

“What?”

“Owowowowowowowow. Are you ow trying ow to crush my ow head ow like a vice owowow?”

“Oh, sorry, sorry. I guess I was overdoing it.”

“You probably don’t want to hear this from me, which is exactly why I’m going to say it, but haven’t you taken on too much? You are overdoing it. Nadeko wasn’t your responsibility or your problem.”

Tsukihi was talking like she knew it all, but in fact she didn’t know the truth about Nadeko Sengoku and her mysterious disappearance for the past few months.

While I wouldn’t say my sister wasn’t involved in any way, it was hard to say she was□which is exactly why she could say something about it, I guess.

She could say something.

That I didn’t want to hear.

“It’s fine,” she said. “Nadeko’s been a lot livelier lately. She’s cheered up some, gotten more optimistic.”

“Really… That’s great.”

“She even laughs sometimes.”

“That’s…even better.”

Things really were looking up.

To the point that I didn’t need to worry anymore about not seeing that face, that smile, ever again.

“You should go see her sometime. She’s laid up at home, and you’ll be busy with exam prep for a while so it might be tough…”

Tsukihi said this in all innocence, knowing nothing—if she’d been speaking with full knowledge of the situation, it would’ve been scathingly ironic. But, for better or for worse, Tsukihi Araragi is a frank, straightforward person, so I can’t imagine her saying something like that on purpose.

And yet there was something that still concerned me.

Concerned me—so much I was still something of a wreck.

It was impossible for me not to worry—about what Nadeko Sengoku might have told Tsukihi Araragi regarding Koyomi Araragi.

It wasn’t a question of a lack of closure.

But the word regret didn’t even begin to cover it—

“Still, Nadeko talked a ton of shit about you, big brother. What did you do to her, anyway?”

“Seriously?!”

“What? No, I was kidding.”

“…”

Some joke.

The timing was positively scary.

Almost like it was guided by a divine hand.

“Right, well—I suppose that problem remains,” I muttered.

Nadeko Sengoku had left the shrine—and her “disappearance” had come to an end, which was of course a good thing, a fabulous thing, but that good, fabulous thing also meant that the town was spiritually unstable again.

That was the problem I was referring to.

I didn't know all the particulars in perfect detail myself—but in any event, Kita-Shirahebi Shrine was once again a hollow vacuum.

Not resolving that issue or at least trying to do something about it meant endless trouble for our town—and I had to admit that I was reluctant to move away and leave my little sisters behind with the problem as it stood.

Even if I couldn't fully solve the problem.

I at least needed to bring things back into balance—

"Balance? That's not really my job, though, is it…"

Job.

I'd thought I'd muttered the words under my breath, but as if she'd heard my whole inner monologue, Tsukihi responded, "It's not your job."

My heart skipped a beat. Was it synchronicity, or a psychic connection between siblings? No, it seemed to be nothing more than a coincidence since Tsukihi continued, "You're taking on too much, big brother," returning to her previous topic. "You can't fix everything on your own. Some things you've just got to let go of, some things you've got to leave be. Know your limitations, it's okay to let other people handle things sometimes, you know? You're too concerned about Nadeko, about Karen, and about me too."

"…"

Huh.

So that's what she wanted to tell me?

And she hadn't just picked up on it because I'd brought up Karen's abilities, she seemed to have sensed it for a while.

Sensed that I was using graduation, and my exams as a chance.

To take care of a bunch of things—to solve them, to settle some accounts.

That I was trying to wrap up some things.

Things that I'd let go.

Things that I'd fudged.

"We—or I'll just speak for myself, I, will manage somehow. After Karen graduates and I'm alone at the middle school, I know I'll feel off balance, but I'll manage somehow, in my own way. So you don't need to worry, okay? It's fine, everything's A-OK. And Karen'll manage too, of course. We'll all manage somehow. Even Nadeko. So for now, you should just focus on the exams staring you in the face."

"…"

Just moments ago, I'd wanted to admonish my little sister for only paying attention to what was right in front of her, to get her to think more about her future. For her to tell me to focus on the now—what could I say?

It wasn't funny.

But it didn't piss me off, either, didn't make me want to throw it back in her face—I definitely was taking on too much, and couldn't fix everything on my own.

There were limits to what I could do.

In fact, there were things I hadn't been able to fix.

With Hachikuji.

With Sengoku.

Nothing would have gotten done without help from the experts. In fact, was there a single goddamn thing this past year that I'd managed to fix on my own?

When I tried to count them, there was nothing to count.

Even with my exams, and the graduation on which they hinged, I

hadn't gotten anywhere on my own. So yes, she was right, I'd taken on too much. She was absolutely right.

I'd spouted some line about the duties of an older brother.

But sensing your duty doesn't necessarily mean being able to carry it out—there are times when you have to get help from someone else, times when you have to leave it to someone else.

Tying up every loose end by the time I graduated, by the time I left town, might be inherently impossible—but that didn't mean I could be irresponsible and just neglect everything.

It isn't good to take on too much.

But there are things you have to do.

And things that you have to try to do, even if you know you can't.

"So how are things going with your exam prep, big brother? One month to go, think you'll manage?"

"I…think so, I guess," was the only reply I could give.

Even if I didn't think I'd manage, that was the only reply I could give.

A lamentable attempt at autosuggestion.

Senjogahara had been recruited, and there was no question about where she was going to college. So all I could do was try and follow her—too late at this point to even shoot for a backup, it'd be impossible.

Here I was, not taking even a single backup exam in an ultimate display of manliness—though actually it was only because my parents didn't have much faith in me and hadn't been willing to shell out more in the way of exorbitant exam fees.

"Okay," my sister said, "then listen to me when I tell you that this isn't the time to be taking more on, you moron. It's crunch time. I'm giving you good advice here, big brother. Given the circumstances,

is this any time to be giving your little sister a sponge bath?"

"Well, on that score, I'm not trying to shoulder some kind of responsibility, I'm not appointing myself to some role, I'm not helping you with your bath… I'm not lathering you up and fondling you."

"The fundamental problem remains, though. Taking turns washing each other solved the issue of how small the bathroom is but not of how small the bathtub is."

"You're absolutely right… The tub's size makes it hard enough to enact the idea of cozy co-existence with a little girl, let alone a middle schooler."

"A little girl?"

"Nothing. Obliviate."

Ultimately I decided against using the showerhead and took the washbasin, like I'd done earlier when Tsukihi tried out her horrifying gag, to scoop water from the bathtub-which-was-kind-of-small-to-share-with-a-middle-schooler, this time dumping it over her head from behind.

I contrived this rough-and-ready method of flushing it all out at once instead of relying on the shower's water pressure since that conditioner clung tenaciously to hair.

"Aaagh!"

It was so gratifying to hear this cry of apparent pleasure from my client that I doused her two more times, on the house.

"Aaagh! Aaagh aaagh aaagh!"

She seemed to be enjoying it.

"Aaagh! Do it again!"

A little too much.

If I complied with her request, complied a little too much, there wouldn't be enough hot water left in the tub, so I stopped there and reached for the showerhead, intending to use that to finish the job.

And as I did.

I froze.

There was a full-length mirror on the wall by where we'd been shampooing each other's hair, but up until then, up until that very second, it had been all fogged up and beaded with water so that nothing could be reflected there, and nothing had been yet as I was dumping all that water from the washbasin over Tsukihi's head, the spray had splashed forcefully onto the mirror as well.

As a result, the moisture covering it was momentarily washed away, and reflected there was Tsukihi's naked body as she sat facing the mirror a simple natural phenomenon. Perfectly natural.

But there was also something unnatural.

No.

Supernatural.

My figure, that of Koyomi Araragi, which should have been standing there behind Tsukihi was nowhere to be seen.

I had no reflection.

Just like the immortal aberration we call a vampire.

005

The nail on my pinky toe that Tsukihi had crushed earlier in my room was still split—still miserably, painfully split. Which meant that, at present, I was not in vampiric form. And yet, I had no reflection—how was I to interpret this?

Whatever the answer, it was at the very least not a phenomenon I could approach with a cool head.

Because this was happening for the first time since I'd become a vampire over spring break—but maybe bringing up all this stuff out of the blue will make you think I've finally lost my marbles, things having been weird ever since I went into the bathroom with my little sister. So let me give a brief explanation.

Over spring break I was attacked by someone—by something. By a vampire.

A vampire beautiful enough to freeze your blood.

I was attacked by the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded vampire—Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

She sank her teeth into my neck, clung there like a leech.

She possessed me utterly.

And she sucked me dry, of all the blood, all the spirit I possessed.

She wrung out my very being.

Then hung me out to dry as the vampire I'd become.

"Become."

I had mutated—into an aberration.

That was the end of Koyomi Araragi the human being, and the beginning of Koyomi Araragi the vampire—and those two weeks of spring break were hell on earth.

Fourteen ghastly days.

The upshot is that, as you can see, in the end I became human again—there were some lingering side effects, but I went from being a demon to being a person once more.

What I had to give up in return was not insignificant, the price I had to pay was a heavy one indeed, but at any rate—if nothing else, at least I became human again.

Happily, proudly.

I revere Tsubasa Hanekawa like a second mother, like my own personal Mother Teresa, because of the debt I owe her for saving me back then—but if I start in on that story we'll be here all night, so shameful as it is, I'm going to skip that part for the moment.

The hell came to an end.

It came to an end after fourteen days.

Or I thought it had, anyway.

Of course I'm not trying to say that everything was wrapped up tight with a neat little bow on top, that there were no hard feelings and no more troubles waiting for me down the line. My experiences over that spring break became the catalyst for a catalogue of catastrophes—but at least that single issue, of me personally becoming a vampire, well, that at least I thought had been sorted out.

I thought I'd become human again—but if I had.

Then why the hell didn't I have a reflection?

Isn't the lack of a reflection one of the primary characteristics of a vampire? Immortality, drinking blood, turning into a shadow, turning into mist, shapeshifting, flying, using bats as servants.

And.

No reflection.

Not appearing in mirrors.

That made it seem like I wasn't a misbegotten, half-assed vampire—but the real deal.

Wasn't that the inescapable conclusion?

"…"

"What's wrong, big brother?"

I'd fallen silent without realizing it, and naturally enough, when I clammed up all of a sudden, Tsukihi sensed that something was wrong and nonchalantly turned to face me—with her eyes still closed, since I'd just been dumping buckets of water over her head, which meant she'd yet to notice my lack of a reflection.

It would be a disaster if she ever did.

So I took Tsukihi's face, turned towards me as it was, in both hands and held it there.

Not massaging it.

Holding it firmly in place.

Reflected in the mirror beyond her, needless to say, was just her body. Just the nakedness of her developing body. My reflection, which should have been visible beside her nakedness, was nowhere in evidence.

The wall of the bathroom was reflected instead as if nothing stood there—just the towels on the towel rack affixed to the wall.

Nothing else.

No one else.

"Wh-What are you doing, big brother?" asked Tsukihi in

consternation.

And consternation seems like the reasonable reaction if your big brother grips you by the head when you idly turn around. However fast the wheels in there might turn, no other spin you could put on that turn of events.

Well, if your wheels turn quickly enough, apparently there's one conclusion that might, in its own way, present itself□

"I see. It's okay, big brother, go ahead," Tsukihi said, gently closing her eyes and puckering her lips.

How is that okay?! would ordinarily have been my comeback, but under the circumstances I had no choice. The time had finally come to bring to bear on my little sister the ol' act□by now so routine a part of Koyomi Araragi that it has been granted citizenship□of silencing her with a kiss. I squared myself.

"There□"

Now that I'd made up my mind, I didn't hesitate (since this wasn't a first, scarily enough) and moved to steal a kiss from my little sister, four years my junior. But at that moment fate intervened.

The work of the Skytree, perhaps.

"Phew! Man, am I sweaty! Thanks for getting the bath ready, big brother! I'll come say a proper thank-you afterwards□"

With that, the door to the bathroom banged open and a jockish girl whose high-rise, I mean, height rose to almost six feet traipsed in buck naked and covered in sweat, clutching a towel in one hand. It was Karen Araragi.

"□The fuck are you trying to pull!"

As befits a hand-to-hand combat specialist.

She was freer of hesitation than I was.

The second she appeared she unleashed a spontaneous spinning

jump-kick perfectly geared to the cramped bathroom and sent both me and Tsukihi flying into the tub.

In other words, the first bath was a cozy shared affair, after all. Tsukihi's mental wheels may spin faster, but Karen spins faster in the body department—uh huh, yeah.

Then the three Araragi siblings, Tsukihi and Karen and I, all got to know one another a little better as we took a bath together for the first time in forever—is not what happened next. Karen just threw me out.

No, this is about a big brother's duty, compunction, point of honor, pride, story development—I attempted logical counterarguments, but she expelled me. "Are you a moron?! Use your common sense! Use your lack of common sense!"

Use your lack of common sense.

That little nugget of constructive criticism fit me like a glove.

Well, the older brother who'd been expelled from the bathroom was pathetically tragic in his own way, but compared to the girl who had to stay and get a serious earful from her older sister, I'd say he got off pretty light.

Speaking as a brother, it was truly painful to leave Tsukihi alone at the mercy of an enraged Karen, but well, I had my own issues, and it was actually a favorable outcome to be driven out into the hallway where there were no mirrors.

No, forget favorable.

Things were pretty goddamn unfavorable for me at the moment—

"Hey, Shinobu. Shinobu. Shinobu, are you awake? C'mon, wake up, Shinobu, I need you."

Alone in my room, I checked the mirror in futile desperation, but no reflection in that one either, so I leaned in close to where my shadow fell on the carpet and called for Shinobu.

Shinobu being Shinobu Oshino.

The merest specter of she who was once the vampire Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, the one who attacked me over spring break—now a little girl.

An eight-year-old.

In other words, she was, in her own way, no longer a vampire—but now, as I was now mysteriously manifesting the “symptoms” of a vampire, I feared that something was happening to her as well.

Well, it was a totally realistic fear—since whatever else was going on, our souls were paired.

Shinobu and I were like a single entity.

The pseudo-vampire hidden in my shadow.

She who dwells in the shadows—Shinobu Oshino.

“Shinobu! Shinobu!”

Gave no response at all.

Unable to determine whether this lack of response was basically a holdover from the nocturnal habits of her vampire days or the result of something happening, my distress continued to mount.

Shinobu.

What’s wrong, Shinobu.

“Rise and shine, Shinobu! Come on, you can’t sleep all day!”

For no particular reason I tried imitating my little sisters, but as I feared, I got no reaction. Here I was, unexpectedly learning firsthand the hardships those two endure in trying to get their sleepyhead brother out of bed.

Vowing to leave off manufacturing weird excuses in my head and to leap out of bed awake and refreshed from tomorrow on, I continued

calling into my shadow.

“Shinobuuu! I’ve got donuts, Shinobuuu! Your beloved Mister Donuuut! Golden Chocolaaaate!”

“For reals?!”

A little blond girl, making her entrance accompanied by this recycled line.

Casually, guilelessly.

When she appeared she had her fist in the air for no apparent reason, like a lively character from an old anime. Since I was leaning in close over my shadow, the pose became an uppercut to the jaw, and I tumbled over backwards.

Like a dead bug.

“The Golden! Where be the Golden Chocolate, my lord?! If thou hast played me false, shalt die for it, I shall tear out thy carotid artery!”

“…”

My head hurt from banging it against the floor when I fell over backwards, but that was the least of my worries, since Shinobu herself was about to kill me.

Her lively energy was seemingly enough to keep her from feeling the damage she should have experienced through our link.

At least nothing appeared□nothing disappeared to be out of the ordinary with Shinobu. Consoling myself with this fact, whilst simultaneously dealing with the fresh anxiety of being excoriated and possibly slain by Shinobu, I raised my torso off the floor and said, “Something’s horribly wrong, Shinobu! I don’t appear in the mirror!”

“What sayest thou? Speakest of the tale of Snow White? Fair ye may be, my lord, but sadly not fairest of them all, methinks.”

Shinobu's gaze darted about the room as she said this.

I'd hoped that raising my voice would force her into following my script, but it didn't seem to have worked. I'm pretty sure the only reason her gaze was darting about the room was because she was looking for donuts.

Don't tell anyone, but it made me surprisingly happy that she called me "fair," even if she was just bullshitting.

"…"

Shinobu's glance ceased its darting.

Having likely ascertained that she wouldn't find any donuts no matter where she looked, she fixed me with an icy glare.

Terrifying.

Terrifying enough to make me stop worrying about that piddling no reflection thing.

Is that any way to look at your "lord and master"?

"Heed these words, my lord. Art thou aware?"

"Of wh-what?"

"That in this world there be lies which may be told, and lies which must ne'er be. Lies which concern not the immortal soul fall into the former camp, whilst those which do fall into the latter."

"Get real, the only thing you're worried about are lies that concern donuts, right?!"

What, is your immortal soul a donut?! Complete with a void in the center?!

"'Tis just so…" said Shinobu, moving languidly and laughing gruesomely.

Don't bust out your signature expression for this!

“This place be devoid of donuts… Devoid of donuts, as unto the center of a donut itself. Wherefore I shall pierce thee bodily and make a donut of thee, my lord!”

“The Donut Effect!”

Joking aside, Shinobu really did come at me, but ever since spring break she had lost almost all of her vampiric power, and her attack was nothing more than the pretty little Bodyattack you would expect from an eight-year-old. I simply caught her in a gentle bear hug. A simple display of my hugging prowess.

Still, my blood ran cold for a moment.

Her expression, at least, was deadly serious.

“Ahh. To be so embraced by thee, my lord, I feel my anger cooling even now.”

“You’re too soft on your lord.”

While not being turned into a donut was certainly something of a relief, at the same time it engendered another feeling quite apart from that.

You see, up to that point, whenever the physical and mental “after-effects” of having been a vampire—my symptoms—grew stronger, Shinobu’s vampiric “nature”—her symptoms—grew stronger in direct proportion.

At present, however, Shinobu’s vampiric power remained lost despite the fact that I was in vampire mode, me and me alone—this had never happened before.

No, it wasn’t just—that it had never happened before.

It was something that could never happen, no matter what. Wasn’t it?

Never—under any circumstances.

“Shinobu. Please listen.”

“Mmm. If thou dost not embrace me further, I shall pay thee no heeeed.”

“Listen!”

You can’t always let your body rule your mind!

You’re a little girl, for crying out loud!

I summed up that morning’s events from the time my sisters woke me up—or no, I didn’t sum anything up. I went on and on, blah blah blah, telling her every single thing in excruciating detail.

As she listened, Shinobu’s face indeed underwent a transformation from soft and sweet to something much more serious. Seemingly the gravity of my predicament had gotten through to her.

“…And that’s what happened.”

“Hmm. I see,” Shinobu nodded. “At long last thy relationship with thine own sisters hath crossed a certain line.”

“Nope, that’s not the important bit!”

“It may not be important, but ’tis most serious indeed. How wilt thou fix this mess thou hast made? Or hast thou already given up hope of further anime adaptations?”

“Shinobu, please, work with me here. We can talk about my sisters later. I’m seriously confused right now—it’s the first time this has ever happened,” I implored her, my tone becoming more and more frantic. “I mean, it’s really tough not having a reflection. How can I put this, it really hits me where it hurts.”

“Indeed? And yet a mirror is naught but a reflector of light.”

Shinobu, for whom it was probably the most obvious and banal thing in the world not to have a reflection, wasn’t sharing my agitation. She just gazed blankly back at me. I don’t think she meant it maliciously, but I couldn’t help feeling frustrated by her lackadaisical response.

I wanted to get us on the same page, but how to do it?

Without my having to do anything, however, Shinobu received the wireless signal of my angst, if not my thoughts, through our soul linkage. With a light shrug she said, “What,” finally seeming ready to engage with me, “hast my lord turned without giving me to drink of his blood?”

“Yeah, that’s it, that’s what I’m trying to tell you…or no, not quite. Here, look at the nail on my pinky toe. It’s split, right?”

“Aye. Didst say ’twas crushed by thy sister.”

“If it hasn’t healed, then we can assume I’m not in vampire form right now.”

“Aha,” said Shinobu, taking hold of the ankle I had proffered for inspection and roughly rolling around the toe in question like it was a perfectly natural thing to do.

“Owowowow!”

“Calm thyself. ’Tis distracting.”

“…!”

I didn’t think she could possibly be doing it just to mess with me, so I looked on silently as this scene, ripe with a certain kind of sadism, unfolded□I endured the pain as I waited for the results of Shinobu’s “examination.”

“Hmm. I see.”

“Y-You figured it out?”

“’Tis hard to say□nay, I discerned what is afoot, but cannot for the life of me determine why it should be so□”

How vague.

Not that I’d had my hopes up.

From her reply, it didn’t sound like she’d actually figured anything out—the matter would go no further than a little girl torturing my toe, and I wasn’t about to let that happen. The only thing that would go down was my favorability rating.

“What the hell, Shinobu. If it’s hard to say, forget about that part and just tell me what you discerned, and in a way I can understand.”

“Aye, so I shall—but first, my lord,” said Shinobu. “Clothe thyself.”

006

“Cutting to the chase, my lord, thou art most definitely a vampire at present—just as thou didst suspect. Lacking a reflection is a purely vampiric phenomenon, it has naught to do with any other sort of aberration,” Shinobu explained. As she’d commanded, I was dressed in whatever clothes had been lying around. What had been lying around, or hanging on the wall, getting aired out, was my school uniform, which I wasn’t wearing lately since I wasn’t going to school.

You might call my look Naked Uniform.

Sexy? No?

“A vampiric phenomenon… But Shinobu, see for yourself, my toenail.”

“Quit thrusting it at me. I shall only torture thy foot once a day.”

“That’s not what I’m asking for, is it? It’s not like I enjoyed it, did I?”

“’Tis I who ought to say, see for thyself.” And she did as much. “Thy toe. ’Tis healed.”

“Huh?”

Hearing this, I grabbed my foot and peered intently at it—I had to force myself into a kind of yoga pose, but anyway, I examined the toe in question.

The nail was split, and there were traces of blood—no, it didn’t look healed to me at all.

“That is naught but a superficial view—internally, ’tis quite another matter.”

“Internally?”

“I was not there to witness the scene with mine own eyes, so I cannot be sure, but I have reason to believe that when thy sister didst stomp upon thy foot, the bones of that toe were well and truly broken.”

“Broken?”

She really did crush it!

Super painful, right?!

What the hell was that hair-washing devil thinking?!

“Calm thyself. ’Twas naught but an infinitesimal fracture.”

“An infinitesimal fracture…”

What the hell is that?

An infinitesimally small fracture?

Or does it mean the entire bone was fractured into infinitesimally small pieces?

Because the latter sounded hard to bounce back from…

“When I perpetrated my torture…er, palpitated thy toe, it felt as if the bone had been broken but had since set□which is to say, ’tis healed. Even if not entirely.”

“I see…”

Come to think of it, Senjogahara or somebody was telling me about that.

About banging your pinky toe on the corner of the dresser and curling up in pain□it might sound like just a funny story, but in fact a lot of the time people shatter the bone in their toe like that. Because a broken pinky toe doesn’t actually affect your life all that much on a practical level, it often heals up without the person ever

realizing it had been broken—something like that, anyway?

Incidentally, when I tried out the “banging your pinky toe on a corner” subject on Hanekawa, her only response was, “Huh? I’ve never banged my pinky toe on a corner.” That aside, if what Shinobu said was true, it all added up.

Which reminds me, by which I mean, now that she’d said it, the excruciating pain from when it happened had vanished without a trace—interesting.

So this—was a form of healing as well?

“But it’s totally different from my impression of how a vampire’s body heals…”

“Thy impression.”

“Yeah.”

To be honest, I’m loath to compare it to spring break, when I was transformed into a full-on vampire—but back then, if my arm, or leg, or even head got blown off, it’d heal a second later.

No, the already overblown phrase “a second later” doesn’t even cover it.

If a part of my body was destroyed, it regenerated simultaneously—is, I think, closer to the truth. Hard to believe if you haven’t seen it with your own eyes.

But it’s true. I know because I didn’t just see it, I experienced it, experienced it personally—the vampiric healing factor is, how can I put this, a bat-shit crazy, fucked up, out of control, jaw-dropping thing.

Or at least I’d thought it was.

“Hmm…thou hast the right of it. But ’tis also true that no human being could heal a fractured bone in a mere hour.”

“Yeah…”

Though with Karen, all bets were off.

Not to mention Karen's sensei.

Though never having met her sensei, I'm really just speculating on that one.

"Then I shall perform a simple test for thee. Proffer me thine arm."

"Like this?"

"Scratch!"

Accompanied by this sound effect (?), Shinobu scratched my arm.

Like a cat.

In a feat of bodily manipulation, she'd suddenly extended her fingernails into sharpened claws.

"Owww that doesn't hurt?"

"I should think not. I merely grazed thy skin." Shinobu flashed her claws for me to see. "'Tis the same level of damage as scraping the inside of thy cheek for a scientific experiment."

"How does a vampire know anything about scientific experiments?"

"I have lived lo these five hundred years."

It was more like six hundred, actually.

Not that I was going to hassle her about fudging her age.

It's bad manners to talk about a woman's age.

Not sure about an aberration's, though.

"Okay, so you scraped my arm, now what?"

"Observe."

"Hm?"

Unbelievably.

Or should I say inevitably?

The wound on my arm where Shinobu had scratched me vanished—well, it was never exactly a wound, but any sign of it vanished without a trace.

“Look there. Thy body hath healed itself.”

“Mm-hmm…no question about it.”

Somehow the unimpressive healing of that unimpressive wound didn’t sweep away all my misgivings, but there was no question that my healing factor, my physical regeneration, was somewhat enhanced.

“Nay, I know thy mind is not fully at ease, my lord, but be wary—I advise thee to draw those curtains closed. For should a vampire with such a meager healing ability be exposed to sunlight, he would be reduced to ash without even catching flame.”

“Oh, uh huh…”

Shinobu’s dire words filled me with dread. I rose, and contorting my body to keep it out of the sun’s rays, closed the curtains. This naturally made the room pretty dim, so I turned on the light.

“’Tis merely a precaution… ’Tis possible, nay probable, that ye might walk openly beneath the sun in safety. Simply because thou hast manifested some ability to heal meanest not that thou art fully become a vampire once more, my lord. Here now, say eee.”

“Hm?”

“Say eee.”

She said it so childishly that I failed to take her meaning, but the second time, Shinobu just did it for me—it was super cute—spreading my lips apart on the side like I was saying, “eee.”

Okay, it wasn’t that cute.

Holding my lips in that position, Shinobu inspected the area closely, then concluded with, “Aye. For now, at least, thou hast not grown fangs.”

“Really?”

“Aye. If thou believest me not, look in the mirror.”

“But the whole point is that I don’t have a reflection!”

“Ah, of course.”

Heh, a smile rose to Shinobu’s face.

Gimme a break.

On purpose or not, it was pretty annoying.

But also super cute.

“Then touch it and see,” she suggested.

“Like this?”

“Who told thee to touch mine chest? I’m talking about thine own tooth.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Her cool reaction made me feel like a plain old pervert. No, regardless of her reaction, I was a plain old pervert.

“Mm-hmm.”

“And?”

“It’s hard, feels normal.”

“’Tis not a question of texture.”

Shinobu didn’t seem too impressed that I’d remembered to throw in a nice little joke even at a time like this. “Well, it isn’t pointed. My teeth are definitely regular teeth□and very fine teeth at that, if I do

say so myself. Let's see, what other vampiric phenomena can we check for right now…"

"Why not try eating garlic for thy morning meal?"

"I don't want to have such an intense breakfast… Wait, but if that tested positive, wouldn't I just keel over and die?"

"Like as not."

"I'm not liking like as not."

It was no joke.

Sure, I was living a life where I might die at any moment, but I could never face my parents if I died just because I ate some garlic. Nor could I face Senjogahara. And not because of the garlic breath.

"Such experiments can be left for another day. At present, 'tis the most dire of scenarios to which we ought turn our minds, my lord—'tis not a reality that thou might wish to face, but in my judgment, thou art at present a half-baked vampire. If thou canst," and here Shinobu's tone turned serious, "I ask that thou dost trust my judgment. Lest we waste time in pointless investigations."

"Okay. I'll trust you."

Which didn't mean that my misgivings had vanished.

While my toe and skin had indeed healed, neither one seemed like an impossible occurrence, which meant that the only phenomenon of note, and my predicament at the moment, was "lacking a reflection."

Definitely insufficient evidence to say that I was a vampire, or at least, it would be a premature conclusion—Mèmè Oshino, the expert, might even call it imprudent and rash—but.

But nonetheless.

I trusted Shinobu.

I'm embarrassed even to say it, I can't believe I'm putting it in print, but it felt only right.

"Then it's really you I'm worried about. Are you okay? Nothing's happening with your body?"

"Nay. And judging from mine earlier inability to pierce thy body, my lord, my power hath not returned□"

Wait a minute, she really tried to put a hole in me?

Not a shred of mutual trust to be found in that thought.

"And what is more, our link is born purely of the drinking of blood□save for if I should bite thy neck whilst half-asleep and drink thy blood, no connection should be possible."

"Well, I never wanted to say so, but I've always thought that seemed like a strong possibility."

"Impertinent lout. Never in all my five hundred years have I been half-asleep."

"Oh really…"

I let that one pass.

If further investigations were a waste of time, using that time for our comedy routine definitely was too. Just this once, we had to abandon the stance that the idle banter was the real point of these books.

What mattered now was whether there'd been some change in Shinobu's body.

"Shinobu, first things first, take off your clothes. So I can take a look."

"What dost thou intend with me?"

"I want to torture your little girl feet."

“Thy sisters have not crushed them.”

“Shit…useless little sisters. They couldn’t even manage to give her a little wound like that?”

“I have ne’er even crossed swords with my lord’s sisters, but… That’s it,” said Shinobu, clapping her hands.

The kind of clap where you slap your fist with your open palm.

“I know who to ask.”

“Huh? Who?”

“Well, ’tis certain that some manner of change hath been wrought upon thy body, my lord—and if that change is, as I suspect, some manner of vampiric phenomenon, ’twould be best to consult an expert.”

Her arms crossed, Shinobu sounded strangely reluctant.

At least it didn’t seem like the attitude of someone who’d just been struck by a brilliant idea.

“By an expert…do you mean Oshino? Mèmè Oshino—but we don’t even know where to find him.”

“Nay, I suspect this is outside that brat’s ken—for had he harbored apprehensions that such might befall thee, he would most certainly have shared them with me.”

Shinobu wasn’t overly fond of Mèmè Oshino, the parent whose last name she bore, the master who had bound her with that name, but judging from what she just said, it wasn’t like she didn’t recognize his competence.

At least, she recognized that he wouldn’t skip town—if he knew there was still some kind of crisis lying in wait for me.

In other words, in Shinobu’s considered opinion, this situation was beyond Oshino’s control.

And of course I had no objection to that opinion. I agreed wholeheartedly.

“I know not how to grapple with thy circumstance, my lord. Which means that neither would it profit us to turn to that Aloha brat for aid, even if we knew where to find him. He is naught but useless grime upon my boot heel.”

“…”

She recognized his competence, but apparently that was it. I guess she still hated him.

Fair enough, but…

“Then who are you talking about? Who’s this person you think we should ask?”

“Thou knowest full well. When I say ‘who’ with such a nuance, ’tis clear of whom I speak,” Shinobu replied with real revulsion.

Far more revulsion even than when she spoke of Oshino, who was one of the main causes, one of the architects of her transformation from a bewitching beauty into a helpless little girl.

“I speak of Yotsugi Ononoki.”

007

My first encounter with Yotsugi Ononoki came over summer break—thinking back on that “incident,” I have to be honest, she didn’t make a very good impression on me.

To put it plainly, we were enemies.

What I mean when I say “encounter” is that we fought.

It made sense that Shinobu seemed unhappy about her own suggestion—because she and Ononoki had an honest-to-god duel to the death that time. Or no, maybe it wasn’t a duel to the death for Shinobu—but let’s leave that aside for now.

Yotsugi Ononoki.

Was an expert—and an expert specializing in immortal aberrations, including vampires, in fact.

“Ononoki, huh… But strictly speaking, Ononoki isn’t an expert, is she? It’s Yozuru Kagenui, who employs her as a shikigami, who deploys her as a familiar, who’s the expert, right?”

It’s unclear whether I understood that part correctly, but I’m pretty sure that was the deal. I somehow kept running into Ononoki since that incident over summer break, and our relationship had moved away from straightforward hostility—though her master Ms. Kagenui remained very much my enemy.

I’d heard rumors, but we hadn’t come face to face.

It was Shinobu who faced off against Ononoki.

And it was me who faced off against Ms. Kagenui—in a one-sided massacre. She ran roughshod all over me, but let’s leave that aside as well.

Yotsugi Ononoki and Yozuru Kagenui, huh?

“Okay… Well, it’s definitely a good idea. Though it’s a real shame I can’t say so with a smile on my face.”

“Indeed.”

Shinobu’s feelings seemed similarly complicated.

Something seemed to be rankling her.

An expert who specialized in immortal aberrations was, when you get right down to it, fundamentally her enemy so was it any wonder?

Then again, during that summer break both Shinobu and I were nothing more than “former” vampires, having already lost our immortality, so they let us off the hook what was it they said, something about us being certified harmless?

I said, “Ononoki is one thing… But Ms. Kagenui, well, you know what kind of person she is, what kind of expert she is. If she found out I was manifesting symptoms of vampirism, you know she’d be eager to take me out.”

“To that too, I say indeed indeed, what else could I? And yet, it cannot be that those two solve anything and everything by violent means. In fact, is not their central task, their bread and butter, ye might say, to keep the peasantry from transforming into immortal aberrations and the like?”

“Uh huh… But either way, their services won’t come for free. It’s their job, after all.”

Not gonna be cheap.

Gonna be pricey as hell.

Oshino had asked for five million yen thinking back on it now, what the hell was he doing demanding that much money of a high school student?

“At least, Ms. Kagenui and Ononoki aren’t like Dramaturgy and those other guys… I’m pretty sure they aren’t.”

If they were, we’d be in trouble.

Because once I’d become a vampire over spring break, “those three” did their level best to take me out—me, and I was just Shinobu’s victim. Shoot first and ask questions later. Though I guess that makes sense, since once you narrow down the field even further from immortal aberrations to “vampire specialist,” you had to start viewing all vampires as uniformly evil.

“Ms. Kagenui…” I muttered. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right. She’s without a doubt the ‘strongest’ person I’ve ever met, and I’m sure if we could sidestep our past hostilities and get her to step over to our side, she’d make for a reliable ally.”

Karen once said that Yozuru Kagenui “might just about be a match for my sensei”—at that point I could only guess at how strong Karen’s sensei was from the many anecdotes she’d told me, but it struck me that her statement really said something about Yozuru Kagenui, that expert who avoids treading on the ground at all costs.

“When you get right down to it, Ononoki herself is something of an immortal aberration—”

“A zombie, more like. A corpse tsukumogami. Or to put it plainly, more a doll than aught else.”

“A doll…”

Yup.

That was about the size of things.

“Being a shikigami as she is. Though she be most free for a shikigami… ’Tis surely thanks to the nature of her master.”

As onmyoji are somewhat out of fashion of late, Shinobu added—though I doubted it had anything to do with what was trendy at the moment.

A shikigami's level of freedom, I mean.

"So, what wilt thou, my lord?"

"Good question…"

If you removed my personal feelings—if you removed the resentment, of course, and the fear, the chattering teeth, going to them for help was an excellent idea. It almost seemed like a made-to-order model solution.

But at the same time, like I said, those two—or really just Ms. Kagenui, to be honest, had an extremely dangerous disposition, and she had what it took to back it up.

To the point that even that most ominous of ominous villains, the swindler Deishu Kaiki, openly hated dealing with her—probably because that silver-tongued devil knows better than anyone the privileges enjoyed by those who can solve things with violence.

One wrong word and instead of helping me she might just take me out—though if that's as far as it went, I guess that would be my just deserts. If things really went south and we rehashed the events of the summer—

"But, or, hang on a sec, Shinobu."

"Aye?"

"I don't even know how to get ahold of those two."

"Whaaat?"

Shinobu turned an accusing glare at me.

Seriously, those eyes really are something.

"Kagenui aside, ye joined forces with that Ononoki time and time again—and yet, thou art ignorant? Why did ye not ask for her digits?"

"Vampires don't say 'digits.'"

It lacked dignity.

Way too contemporary.

It was like Oshino using email.

“No, I mean, Ononoki just isn’t the kind of character who’d be walking around with a cell phone… I feel like she said something about not having one even for emergencies. Aberrations seem fundamentally unsuited to a technological civilization in the first place, don’t you think?”

“Is she really such a delicate flower? Hmmm. Then our situation is a difficult one indeed. If we cannot reach her by telephone, is there some other means we might employ?”

“I wonder…”

I wondered.

Modern society’s headlong rush towards increased connectivity, in the form of cell phones and email and whatever else, made it increasingly difficult to get in touch with people who chose not to rely on such tools.

Or maybe we just surrendered to convenience and let those skills atrophy.

It would’ve made things a lot easier if something like Monster Mail actually existed, but it didn’t, so□yup, it seemed like getting in touch with Ms. Kagenui and Ononoki would be just as tough as finding Oshino, now that he’d skipped town.

“What of Kaiki? Could we not contact him? Mayhap he could put us in touch with Kagenui.”

“You can’t be serious.”

I knew how sour my expression was even without a mirror, a reflection. Sure, that swindler was more cell phone-savvy than your average youth□but he’d used that savvy to pull a massive, outrageous con on the people of this town.

“Well…yeah. Though I obviously don’t have Kaiki’s digits, there’s a good possibility that Senjogahara would know how to get in touch with him, even if she didn’t have them either… But that’s a last resort, or a resort I wouldn’t even use as my last, Miss Shinobu.”

“Refrain from calling me ‘Miss.’ And wipe that pathetic look from thy countenance, ’twas clearly said in jest.”

However, noted Shinobu, “that leaves but one candidate.”

“It does? Who else is left? Oh, you mean Hanekawa?”

“That lass is indeed sagacious, but she is no expert—’tis rather Gaen to whom I refer.”

“Gaen.”

“Izukogaen. Is she not the ringleader of these experts?”

“Izuko Gaen…”

Right.

Now that Shinobu brought her up, I realized she was the first person we should’ve thought of—Oshino and Kaiki, and even Ms. Kagenui, referred fondly (?) to her as “Gaen-senpai.” An expert among experts.

And very much their ringleader.

She’d saved my skin before, and we’d also joined forces—and she carried plenty of telecom devices. It seemed like she carried five or six of the things in her pockets, from feature phones to smart phones.

And I felt like I had maybe gotten the number for one of them—

“I wonder, though. I find myself feeling more and more reluctant to ask her for help… Ms. Gaen’s a good person in her own way, but…”

I.

I know everything—she's the type who can make a declaration like that with a straight face and no hint of shame, and rashly relying on her for help could lead me to a horrible end.

If Ms. Kagenui was scary for being so violent, and Kaiki for being so ominous, then Ms. Gaen—

Scared me by being too clever.

"Indeed, 'twould be no surprise for one who seemeth to know everything as she does to know a way to tackle the problem which now besets thee, and yet I cannot council thee to rely directly upon her. Even if 'twas not said in jest, 'twas nonetheless said merely to try the idea on for size. Therefore the most amenable option available to us at present is to send word to Gaen and ask to be put in touch with Kagenui after all."

"…"

After giving it some thought, I said, "Okay, I've got no objections," and reached out for my cell phone where it was plugged into the charger. "Domo arigato, Shinobu."

"'Tis not a question of thanks. 'Tis a question of donuts."

I guess she bore a grudge.

Her love of donuts was just too deep.

Not just deep, almost dark.

I picked up my cell phone.

"Mm—"

Mm?

When the display came up, I turned pale. That may sound like an exaggeration for literary effect, but psychologically it was entirely accurate. And it might sound contradictory, but I felt like I'd been headed off at the pass by someone I'd been chasing after furiously.

There was a message in my inbox.

The phone number itself I didn't recognize, but the body of the message went like this:

Go to the arcade in the department store by the station

Fourth floor

7 p.m. tonight

I've arranged for you to meet Yotsugi there.

Please repay this favor with your friendship at some point in the future.

Your friend

Izuko Gaen

"…"

Speaking with the forced composure of hindsight, maybe it shouldn't have been much of a surprise. Knowing Izuko Gaen's sui generis character and generally peculiar characterization, maybe I shouldn't have been surprised.

Since "heading people off at the pass" was her credo.

If Oshino was the kind of guy who saw right through you.

Then Ms. Gaen saw inside you.

She was penetrating.

She perceived exactly what my situation was and knew exactly what to do about it. She must have.

"Nay, my lord. My lord my lord. Attempt not to force a rational explanation upon this. 'Tis merely creepy, this message which smacks of such omniscience. Seemeth it not almost as if she hath heard the very words of our conversation?"

“I’m doing my best to come to a realistic understanding of this bizarre occurrence, but don’t you go getting all realistic on me…”

I was terrified by the nonchalant request that I pay her back with my friendship, but at the same time, a path had opened before me—apparently, if I went to the department store by the station at seven o’clock that evening, Ononoki would be there waiting for me.

I hadn’t seen Ononoki…for about a month, maybe?

So it was not like I hadn’t seen her in a long time, but back then, things had been in crisis mode with Sengoku, and it was all lost in the maelstrom.

Then again, I was in one now—though I was “merely” dealing with my lack of a reflection this time.

“Oh yeah, I have to tell Senjogahara… We promised each other not to keep secrets when it came to aberrations.”

“That promise hath been broken not a few times.”

“Shut up… There are some things you can’t say no matter what, even if you don’t mean to keep them secret. But this is something I can’t not tell her—”

I didn’t want to worry her unnecessarily.

Was honestly how I felt—but then, this “I didn’t want to worry her unnecessarily” business often ended up becoming a source of worry for her.

“As for Hanekawa…I guess I won’t tell her yet. And even though Ms. Gaen’s involved, or precisely because she’s involved, it’s probably best not to tell Kanbaru either.”

“Indeed. On the occasion of thy previous alliance with her, Madam Ringleader desired to keep her true identity from her own niece—which might even turn out to be her weak point.”

“Quit looking for people’s weak points.”

“The wench might become a foe at any moment. Discerning her weak point could save us from hardship later on.”

“That’s my point! It’s precisely because she might become an enemy at any time that I don’t want you to do anything inflammatory, like, oh, search for her weak point. We definitely want to keep her on our side.”

“Aha, I see thy point.”

I checked the screen of my phone one more time.

Reread the message.

I was apprehensive that another penetrating message from Ms. Gaen might’ve appeared right then, but it hadn’t—maybe I didn’t need to be so scared?

Either way, the arrival of this lifesaver of a message was a positive development for me.

However frightening.

It was a positive development.

She was a terrifyingly pragmatic person—a nightmarish realist, so if there was nothing to be done about my current situation, she wouldn’t have sent me the message. The fact that Ms. Gaen was putting me in touch with Ononoki meant that there had to be some means of solving my problem.

That was what I thought.

Though maybe I just wanted to think it.

And as I was thinking that despite the early hour, I should call Senjogahara, whose path to higher education was already set in stone, and who was consequently spending her days loafing since she didn’t have to go to school anymore—

“Biiig brotherrrr!” the door to my room flew open and Tsukihi barged in.

It's not that she didn't knock, but her knock was so violent that it was part and parcel with the "flew open" bit.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, running away and leaving me behind like that?! Do you have any idea how badly Karen thrashed me after you left?!"

Maybe because she was so incensed, Tsukihi busted into my room in nothing but a bath towel. It was only wrapped around her waist, leaving her upper body completely exposed.

A hell of a fashion statement. A little too cutting edge.

Shinobu was used to my sisters barging into my room like that, so she dove instantly back into my shadow.

"What the? Why are the curtains drawn, big brother? You becoming a shut-in? Or were you planning to go back to sleep? As if I'd let that happen!"

"No no no. The sunlight was just too bright."

There was no way I could properly explain, so I just told her a little white lie□not that she bought it or anything, but nor did I think she was in a place to really get into it with me about my curtains being closed.

As I expected, Tsukihi let it drop, with a satisfied hunfnyaan…

Hunfnyaan? What even is that?

What a way to express your satisfaction.

"Anyway, big brother, you owe me an apology. Come on, apologize. Apologize with words. Apologize out loud. Say you're sorry. Admit your mistake and apologize to me."

"Look at the attitude on you… Fine, come a little closer."

"Oh? You're going to apologize to me? O ho ho, fine by me."

The topless girl with the towel around her waist trotted towards

me. What was it about my little sister that made her so surprisingly unseemly even though all that was going on was that she was fresh out of the bath?

I embraced that unseemly little sister.

Tightly.

“Hunfnyaan?!” Tsukihi shrieked in surprise□no, was it surprise, satisfaction, or something else? I wish she’d hurry up and standardize that one already.

Her character was too peaky and too vague.

“What kind of an apology is this?! What culture says sorry like this? In what country do they express their regret by embracing a naked woman?”

“The naked part isn’t my fault,” I whispered.

Into her ear.

I guess we really were the same height now, given that I could whisper directly into her ear as we embraced without having to lower my head at all.

“Just let your big brother make one request.”

“What? You’re going to ask for something instead of apologizing? You really are perverted… Look down your shirt and spell attic!”

That wasn’t how it was supposed to go.

My melons gaffe notwithstanding.

“Just consider yourself lucky that what I want entails a request, and not a demand.”

“Did you say ‘Wanton Tale’?”

“Tsukihi, listen, okay? I want you and Karen to stay at Kanbaru’s place tonight.”

“Huh?”

Tsukihi looked taken aback like I’d just said something totally nonsensical—no, from her perspective I had said something totally nonsensical, so her reaction was right on the money.

“What’s going on?”

“Don’t ask me why. Please don’t ask. I’ll talk to Kanbaru and Karen about it too, so just do it… Please.”

The home of Suruga Kanbaru, daughter of Izuko Gaen’s older sister Toé Gaen—the safest place I could think of on the spur of the moment.

Ononoki was one thing, but if I was going to make contact with Ms. Kagenui—I had to get Tsukihi far away, at least from our house.

If I didn’t.

It would be summer break all over again.

“Hmph,” grumbled Tsukihi.

Judging from how she didn’t say hunfnyaan, she was going along grudgingly. “Fine. And if I do, it’ll be okay?”

“Yeah. If you’ll do it, I’ll apologize.”

Still embracing her, I said in the present tense, not the past tense:

“Sorry I’m doing this to you.”

But I really blew it.

I was a fool.

Because given what was to come—I should’ve apologized for something else entirely.

008

Night fell.

By “night,” I mean the time after the sun goes down.

Until which point I spent the entire day inside.

Thank goodness school was out for the moment—if I missed any more days, I actually wouldn’t be able to graduate. And it was also fortunate that I was studying for exams, and barely hanging on by the skin of my teeth at that—since no one thought it strange that I spent the entire day holed up in my room studying with the curtains closed. Nor would they invite me to go outside.

Once the sun went down and I’d eaten dinner with the whole family, I left the house—I used to have two bicycles, but I lost both of them in what you could call self-inflicted accidents, and they were now just a fond memory. Putting it that way really doesn’t sit right with me, but—but basically, what can you call dealing with such aberration-ness, such “darkness”-ness, other than self-inflicted, a self-fulfilling prophecy?

And so I walked.

To the station.

After I had left the house and walked for a while, there was suddenly a little blond girl beside me—Tsubasa Hanekawa once said that I looked like I was on Gmen ’75 when I walked, and having Shinobu by my side definitely gave me that kind of reassurance.

“Sorry about this. Thanks for coming with me.”

“I am not doing it for thee. We have ever shared a common destiny, we merely act as though ’twere otherwise.”

“Guess you’re right.”

I lifted Shinobu off the ground where she was walking beside me and put her on my shoulders. I figured it’d be tough on a little girl to trek all the way to the station and was being considerate in my own way.

Man, was she light.

Like she was made of paper.

But even if she’d become almost entirely human, there was no partner I’d rather have by my side.

“As a precaution in the face of the two we go to meet, wilt thou not make me a vampire? If ye let me drink only as much as would be taken for a blood test, we can at least flee should dire circumstance arise.”

“Ummm… But if I make you a vampire, then I’ll become vampirified as well, and my current symptoms will become indistinguishable from everything else… I might not be able to get an accurate ‘diagnosis.’ Plus, Ms. Gaen’s message only said that Ononoki would be waiting for us, she never actually said anything about Ms. Kagenui being there as well…”

“Didst bid farewell to thy lady?”

“No, I didn’t bid her farewell…”

But I’d gotten in touch with Senjogahara.

And after her instantaneous response of I’m coming too, it had been a backbreaking labor to convince her otherwise.

I definitely don’t think I was just being selfish in not wanting to let her meet that onmyoji & shikigami duo.

“To be honest, though, talking to her did make me feel a little better.”

“Hmm. Because in comparison to her former ailment of

weightlessness, thine own lack of a reflection is in fact of no great concern? My lord.”

“Umm, that wasn’t exactly it…”

Though maybe that was exactly it.

“I think it was more because Senjogahara gave me a bunch of advice and also helped me confirm a bunch of details. Like what happens if I look in the mirror with clothes on.”

“Hmmm…”

“When I tried it, turned out my clothes were just floating there in the reflection, so it seems like I have to do everything in my power not to get near a mirror. She also told me to watch out for cars. If I don’t appear in their side-view and rearview mirrors, the chances of my getting hit increase drastically.”

“The lass truly doth take note of the smallest details… How cautiously she must have lived these two years gone.”

Saying this, Shinobu threw her arms around my head. Being as small as she was, embracing my head like that was enough to completely fill her arms.

Just as I was wondering what she was doing, she announced, “I shall sleep a bit more. Wake me when we encounter Ononoki.” And just like that she closed her eyes, her breathing slowing until it was clear that she was asleep. The thought did cross my mind that if she was going to sleep, she could do it in my shadow, but maybe she figured that with what was coming, events could turn on a dime. Sleeping outside would cut out the time it’d take her to emerge from my shadow.

That very morning Tsukihi had likened holding someone’s head in your hands to holding their life in your hands, but maybe by embracing my head like that, Shinobu was actually protecting my life with her hands.

“Now then…”

I've heard that in order to develop a refined posture, aristocratic young women practiced walking with a cup of water balanced on their head, and this was something close to that: don't spill the water, don't wake Shinobu.

And so, walking with my most refined posture, I arrived at my destination, the department store near the station, at 6:55 p.m., just before the appointed time—though depending on how long the elevator took, I might actually end up being a little late.

Picking up my pace, I entered the building.

I thought maybe it'd be faster to take the escalator or run up the stairs… Running up the escalators would be quickest, but they're not for running.

So I chose the stairs.

Not that you're supposed to run up the stairs either, but I couldn't keep Ononoki waiting. I'd probably be out of breath after racing all the way up to the fourth floor—but while some people might be taken aback if the person they were waiting for showed up all out of breath, that wasn't a concern with Ononoki.

She would let it go expressionlessly as always, guaranteed.

"She said the arcade, right? The arcade, the arcade… Is there even an arcade here?"

Wait, it was ringing a bell.

A while back Kanbaru was telling me about this game Love and Berry that she was addicted to, and I could swear she said it was this department store where she played it…

I arrived at the fourth floor and began wandering around with that recollection in mind—and hit pay dirt almost immediately.

Since it was in a department store, though, it was tiny, just a place for parents to put their kids while they shopped, patterned after an arcade but really an arcade in name only. In that sense you could say it was a fitting place for a rendezvous with Ononoki. Plus it

wouldn't be weird to have a little girl like my partner Shinobu with me.

"Hunh? She's not here."

I got there at seven sharp, but not only was Ononoki not there, there wasn't a soul in sight.

"Of all the… Empty. I did exactly like Ms. Gaen said, followed her instructions to the letter…"

I started to worry that maybe Ononoki had gotten into some kind of trouble, but that somewhat paranoid concern vanished when my eyes fell upon the game next to a Love and Berry-like cabinet.

It was what they call a UFO Catcher.

The kind made famous by Toy Story.

Though they would probably be famous even without Toy Story.

The kind where you put in a coin, move the arm, and try to pick up the prize and, all alone, inside the glass case.

Was Ononoki.

Her legs splayed out in front of her, like a doll.

Not even a twitch of movement, like a doll.

"…"

Huh?

Wait, it was Ononoki…wasn't it?

It had to be Ononoki, didn't it?

How did she end up as the prize inside a crane game? I wondered, approaching the machine.

Easy now. I was trying not to transmit my impatience to Shinobu who slept atop my shoulders. Easy does it now.

“Ononoki?”

I tried rapping on the glass, but no response.

No response.

No expression, no emotion.

It was weird, she looked like a real figurine.

No, a figurine is an imitation of the human figure, so maybe calling something a real figurine is itself weird. Plus, Ononoki was always expressionless and emotionless and unresponsive, so her lack of response didn’t prove anything.

“Yotsugi? Yo-o-otsugi-i-i!”

No response.

“Yotsy!”

No response.

Hmmm, maybe they’d just produced a figure of her and I’d missed it somehow… But this was life size.

Big enough that if we were talking Ichiban Kuji Premium, it’d be the Last One Prize… It seemed like there was nothing for me to do but play the game.

I took my wallet out of my pocket. I didn’t think I’d be able to do it with only a hundred yen, so maybe a five-hundred…

Nope, don’t have any. Okay, gotta break a thousand.

I went over to the change machine to break a one thousand-yen bill into ten one hundred-yen coins, and then hurried back over to the UFO Catcher.

Since there was no one else around, maybe I was just being overly anxious, but with this kind of machine you hear stories all the time about people poaching your prize while you’re running to get more

change.

“Though I’ve never really played this kind of prize-type game myself… I wonder how it works.”

I should’ve brought Kanbaru after all.

Despite being a wildly talented athlete, she was deep into this kind of stuff—a perfect superwoman in a totally different sense than Hanekawa.

Musing about that, I inserted one of my newly changed coins into the cabinet. It wasn’t crunch time yet, but the department store did close at eight.

I didn’t imagine it’d take me an hour to get the prize, but still, no sense in dilly-dallying.

“Let’s see… First move the arm sideways with the ① button, then forward with the ② button… Mm-hmm. Got it. The rules aren’t too complicated. Awright then, let’s give it a shot.”

Apparently you started it by pressing the ① button.

I sent the crane arm flying over to where it could pick up Ononoki’s body—

Hm, I think that’s a little too far. That’s not gonna cut it, glad I noticed. Now, how do I bring it back?

Just a slight adjustment… Wait, you can’t make adjustments?

I couldn’t find a button anywhere with a reverse arrow on it…

Feeling abashed, I pressed the ② button—I’d blown it that time, but now that I knew there was no reverse button, I wasn’t going to repeat the same mistake twice.

Definitely seemed like the strategy was to stop the arm a little bit before the prize, then inch your way towards it—WTF? As soon as I took my hand off the button, the arm started to drop!

No, not there! Not there, I'm aiming for deeper in!

But my internal screams did nothing to control the arm, and it came up empty, tracing a path back along the route of my failure almost as if it was mocking me.

"Thou art an abject bungler, my lord."

"Hmph. So you're awake, huh, Shinobu?"

"'Tis the jangling of that obnoxious background music… My lord's head is indeed a comfortable pillow, yet the constant racket renders it inferior to my usual place of repose."

Did she mean my shadow?

Treating someone's head and shadow as nothing more than beds… She might have lost her vampiric power, but her haughtiness still knew no bounds.

"But have a care, my lord. Approach not too closely unto the glass."

"Huh?"

"'Tis reflective."

Ah, in an excess of enthusiasm I'd sidled right up to the glass and was virtually pressed against it, and the light would cause me to be reflected there.

No□would cause everything but me to be reflected there.

Just my clothes would be reflected.

"Hm? Shinobu, you've got a totally normal reflection… Maybe not normal, since it looks like you're floating in midair, but is it because you've lost your vampire powers?"

"At present 'tis so. But at the height of my powers, I could give myself a reflection whenever I so chose. No weakness is truly a weakness for one such as I."

“…”

But of course.

The legend herself.

She left me speechless—but at that point, I should have picked up on what her words implied. True, I guess even if I’d picked up on “it” then, the timing wouldn’t have changed anything.

“It.”

By which I mean the difference between us as vampires.

Anyway, time for my second attempt.

“So basically, I only get one shot at going sideways and one shot at going forward?”

“Aye, ’tis so. Though ’tis written plainly enough, if thou wouldst only read the explanation.”

“I’ve always been hopeless at reading the instructions… Not that it matters.”

With any game, you’ve got to learn by doing.

I pressed the ① button with the utmost deliberation.

I backed away from the glass slightly so I wouldn’t be reflected there, so what wasn’t being reflected wouldn’t be reflected there. But if I backed up too much my sense of distance would be off—I adjusted my position until I was standing in the right spot, or at least a spot that I judged to be the right one, and released the button.

Yup, right there. No question.

“Heheh, I think I might have a gift for crane games.”

“Methinks ’tis too early to say, but even were it so, how might such a talent stand thee in good stead in the future?”

“I’ll become the mysterious old man who wins stuffed animals for little children in arcades.”

“Mayhap a little too mysterious.”

As the words Is that a sufficient future for thee, my lord? floated down from above, I pressed the ② button. This wasn’t some RPG, and I didn’t have time to mess around.

“Okay, right there!”

With the split-second timing of a god among master swordsmen, I released the button. The claws began to descend precisely where I wanted it, directly above Ononoki’s head.

“Hey! Look, Shinobu!”

“I am looking… However, should it descend as such…”

“Hm?”

Before Shinobu could finish, the wide-open claws struck Ononoki, or her figure□legs splayed out in front of her□directly on the noggin.

With a dull thud.

I unconsciously released a sighing “Ah…”

Dealt an overhead attack, the figure of Ononoki crumpled, her upper body losing its equilibrium and teetering before finally falling backwards. In other words, she ended up flat on her back in the glass case and was staring upwards with her arms and legs spread wide.

Her expression changed not at all.

I could observe no physical response.

She remained expressionless when the crane struck her, when she toppled over□well, since she was always expressionless, you could say like her usual self, but this expressionlessness really made me

wonder if the prize in the game might not be a doll made to look like Yotsugi Ononoki, after all.

"'Tis not a question of her expression, her movements be utterly like unto those of a marionette…a doll. She made not the least movement to ready herself for the coming impact."

"Uh huh… Ms. Gaen couldn't possibly be messing with us…could she? I didn't think she was that kind of person, it's not like she said, 'There's a doll that looks like Ononoki in this department store.' Man, that would piss me off. If all I get after blowing this wad of cash is a stupid doll…guess I'll have no choice but to snuggle up with it when I sleep."

"While 'tis true that mine own sense of money is a spot spotty, methinks thou canst not term a few hundred yen a wad of cash, my lord. Get thyself a clue. Truly, thou shalt end up as a mysterious old man who wins stuffed animals from crane games for little children."

"You're right. I've got to do whatever I can to avoid that fate, even if I'm the one who brought it up in the first place…"

Putting that aside.

And while I may have already become an extremely mysterious teenager with a little blond girl sitting on my shoulders, racing the clock in a closing department store to try and win a life-size doll of a young girl from a crane game, definitely putting that aside as well.

My second attempt had ended in failure—all I'd done was knock Ononoki down so she was splayed out flat—and the crane arm had returned to its original position. Third time's the charm?

"Well, at least that blunder wasn't a waste… I've learned something. Seems like it's not as simple as just positioning the arm directly above the prize. You've got to consider the way the claws move too. I bet not a lot of people realize that."

"Would not those of superior intuition realize it before they even made their first attempt?"

“Don’t you think the computer should just make those adjustments for you?”

“What would be the point of such a forgiving prize game?”

“Before, it would’ve been best to drop it around her thighs, but with the position she’s in now…her waist would be best, I guess. If I can hook her waist with a claw, I should pick her right up.”

“I wonder, be the arm powerful enough for that?”

“GO!”

I went.

I inserted the coin and started moving the arm aiming for Ononoki’s waist. If everything went according to plan, the crane would pick Ononoki up by the waist, pull her up, raise her up, and provide the perfect angle for me to get a full view of the contents of her skirt.

I was planning to fine-tune my own position in addition to the crane arm’s, but in the end, my aim was thwarted.

The arm did begin to lift Ononoki by the waist, but her mass wrenched the claw open, and she fell back into her original spot this time on her side.

And the arm returned to its original position.

“This arm’s got no strength at all!”

“Did I not tell thee? I believe I did. Thou shouldst heed my advice.”

“Sure, yeah, that’s true, but…”

I was all out of protestations.

Apparently I sucked at UFO Catchers (I take back everything I said), so maybe I should let Shinobu do it for me?

No, she was more of an armchair quarterback…

“Still, the crane just let Ononoki drop without even putting up a fight! It’s too weak! It didn’t even get her off the ground for a second!”

“Mayhap the screws are loose. Though that too may simply be a question of the generosity of the house, or lack thereof. The power of the arm is in truth theirs to dictate as they see fit.”

“You can’t be serious… That’s not fair.”

What the hell was I going to do?

The game was rigged against the player.

The only thing I could control was the movement of the arm□and that incompletely, while the house had full hegemony over the arm’s power. I was helpless.

“Nay, my lord□while ’tis true that the claws’ power to close, hold, and lift be paltry, there is yet one thing the house cannot control.”

“Yeah? And what’s that?”

“The power of the arm as it falls□its descending force. Erst struck Ononoki from above, did thee not? And that had, if nothing else, the requisite force to alter the lass’s position.”

“…And?”

“Ergo□” Shinobu pointed by way of explanation, “just as one might use a stick to push a rock into a river, thou canst use the arm to trundle Ononoki over to the hole without ever raising her up.”

“…”

That might be a “feasible” strategy for a UFO Catcher, but Shinobu’s phrasing made it a cheat without an ounce of affection for the doll in question.

Trundle.

“Well, I guess that’s the only hope we’ve got left…but I’ve only got

seven coins left. I wonder if seven'll do it?"

"My lord. By the by."

"What is it?"

"It appears thou mayest play four times if dost insert three coins at once."

"Why didn't you say so sooner?!"

The battle certainly didn't get any easier from there on out. We'd figured out a back door, but of course things didn't go according to plan, and time and again the arm banged ineffectually against Ononoki's body.

Her lack of reaction was somehow painful to look at.

It was just too pitiful.

Even when I did succeed, the distance she moved was so incremental that it was extremely unlikely I could pull it off with the coins, the credits, I had remaining□seven coins meant nine plays.

My coffers were slowly but steadily dwindling.

Trundling towards oblivion.

"Hrk… What am I gonna do when these credits are gone…"

"Change another thousand-yen bill. Thou art carrying that much, art thou not?"

"What's with the lukewarm comeback? Heat things up for me, like in an arcade manga in CoroCoro Comics."

"Dost such manga still exist?"

And while this banter was going on□at last.

At last, with my final credit, I succeeded in using the arm to nudge Ononoki into the hole□she landed in the retrieval drawer with a

thud. It was more than just a dull sound, though, it sounded like something somewhere in there broke.

“I did it, Shinobu!” I pumped my fist, pretending I hadn’t heard that sound. “It’s a happy ending!”

“Why do I feel as though our original goal hath been forgot…”

“Original goal? Wasn’t our original goal to get Ononoki?”

“Nay.”

“That’s ridiculous. What higher goal could there be in this world than to win a tween girl?”

“If that is all thou desirest, my lord, then there, take the lassy and go. ’Tis nigh on the time for this store to close its doors.”

She was right.

I’d thought we had plenty of leeway, but all of a sudden it was past 7:45—any second now they were going to start playing “Auld Lang Syne” over the speakers.

Obviously not having forgotten my original goal—of dealing with the mysterious phenomenon afflicting my body—I moved to retrieve Ononoki. I mean, whether or not I’d forgotten, either way we weren’t going to get anywhere unless I got her out of there.

I pulled the handle on the drawer.

“Mph… It’s stuck, I can’t get it open.”

“Grit thy teeth and pull with all thy might. She may lose an arm or a leg, perhaps, but even so.”

“You think I can just ignore that ‘perhaps’?”

Ononoki, probably a little too big for the opening, had gotten hung up… If this was an ordinary prize, I could just call over an employee, but that didn’t seem like such a good idea if it was the real Ononoki.

Jiggling the handle back and forth, I pulled the drawer out little by little—kind of like sifting flour into cake batter.

That's purely a metaphor, I've never actually baked a cake before—but nonetheless, my stratagem worked, and I was able to get the thing open.

Ononoki was stuffed in there in a crumpled heap—like one of those sponges that regain their shape when you add hot water.

"Yo-o-otsugi," I tried calling to her.

Like I was on a children's television program, for some reason.

…No reply.

The expression like a dead body was a little too fitting for Yotsugi Ononoki given that she'd been made from a corpse, but there you go.

"What took you so long?"

Finally she replied.

In a placid, emotionless voice that reminded me of the way Hitagi Senjogahara used to be—though it differed from Senjogahara's voice in being totally mechanical, artificial in every way.

"How long could it possibly take to win me? You suck at games."

"And you've got a big mouth for a doll…" I said, pulling Ononoki out and flipping up her skirt to make sure everything underneath was okay.

"Chop."

Ononoki's karate chop came down on the back of my neck.

And it was a backhand, like in tennis. A chop that wove skillfully between Shinobu's legs.

"Don't get fresh, kind monster sir. Monstieur."

“No no no, I was just wondering what’s going on under the skirts of beautiful girl figurines like this one. I just thought I’d check.”

“If that’s your excuse, at least get it out there before I’ve spoken. While there’s still the possibility that I’m just a common doll.” This fierce retort was delivered in an endlessly placid voice—a monotone so unnatural it was almost like it was processed. “That is, I’m not just a common doll—but I am a doll. An uncommon doll, dolled up to look like a real person.”

“…”

“Yaaay,” she flashed a sudden sideways peace sign.

A sideways peace sign that said, To hell with the flow of this conversation. Her pose was ludicrously, lethally cute, but her expression was expressionless, totally unconcerned, and totally unchanged from when she was in the glass case. The gap was surreal.

Not gap moé, surreal moé.

“Anyway, haven’t seen you in a while, monstieur.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Haven’t seen you in a while either, sis,” Ononoki said, raising her gaze from my face to the space above my head—where I imagine it came to rest on the little blond girl riding on my shoulders.

“Address me not as sis. What meanest thou, what thinkest thou our relationship to be?”

“My apologies. I’m not ashamed to admit that I forgot what our relationship was like, Ma’am Vampire.”

“’Tis more like it, thou forgetful lout,” spat Shinobu.

I guess that first impression had been seriously negative, and Shinobu’s attitude towards Ononoki was severe—the little girl really knew how to hold a grudge.

While we're on the subject, the tween girl standing before me didn't hold onto much of anything. That is, her character was unstable. I knew as much from the time we'd spent together up to that point, but her personality was totally indefinite.

Blurry as all hell.

Although she did have something approaching a characterization every time I saw her or it appeared that way, anyway, but it could diffuse at a moment's notice, evaporate like mist, and transform into something else entirely.

Which in a sense just marked her as an aberration, and maybe blurry wasn't a very precise way to describe her.

Now then.

What the hell kind of character was she at the moment? Seemed like she had an acid tongue, or a bad attitude…

"Ah. I don't suppose, Ononoki. Miss Yotsugi Ononoki."

"What is it, monstieur. Kind monster monstieur."

"Too much monster."

"Aren't you playing Dr. Kawashima's Monstrous Training?"

"Since I'm studying for exams I do have an interest in the game, but forget the monster connection. Don't connect us. Anyway, I don't suppose," I brought the conversation back around.

To my baseless supposition.

"That you've seen Deishu Kaiki recently?"

"I haaave," Ononoki replied with a calm nod.

Interesting…

Ms. Kagenui had told me that the "ki" in "Ononoki" came from Kaiki from that ominous swindler's name.

This was apparently because he'd had a hand in her "production," but I didn't know much more than that.

So my conjecture had been more or less pure guesswork. But, to my surprise, bingo.

Not that it was a bingo I was pleased by.

Quite the opposite.

That swindler, exerting his malign influence on this innocent young girl.

"Well, fine. I'll let that go for now."

Influence was nothing but influence, after all.

Even a malign influence was still just influence.

Light-years better than the man himself.

"Haven't seen you in□it actually hasn't been that long, has it, Ononoki."

"You're right. How long's it been, I wonder. And since the three of us were all together□oh, yeah, when snail girl□"

"…"

"Hm?" Ononoki cocked her head.

Not in response to her own insensitive words, seemingly□but that time, that time that brought together the little girl and the young girl and the tween girl, was definitely very memorable.

In various senses.

In many senses□in every sense.

Very memorable indeed.

"Well, we've got a lot to talk about. We've got a lot to talk a lot about, but this is no time for chitchat, is it, monstieur. I'm not here

to hang out with my friend this time, I'm here on business. I'd forgotten, sorry sorry sorry."

"Ononoki."

I was secretly thrilled that Ononoki casually made it clear she thought of me as a friend, but it pretty much turned to ashes in my mouth with that last "I'd forgotten."

I guess I'm a forgettable friend, I thought—but it was definitely true that this time around, we weren't just hanging out and eating ice cream together.

To the outside observer, a teenager standing in the arcade at a department store with a little girl and tween girl probably appeared to be their babysitter (god help me if it looked like anything else), but that wasn't the case.

I was there to ask this girl.

To save me.

This expert—this expert's familiar.

This tsukumogami, Yotsugi Ononoki.

"So, Ononoki."

"What is it, what is it? Yaaay."

Even with Kaiki's influence, her absurdly sunny disposition remained relatively intact, making Ononoki's personality even more frustratingly complicated and strange, but I aimed my words between the spread fingers of that sideways peace sign. "There are two things I want to ask you."

"Ask me anything. I want to answer my most favorite monstieur's questions even if he doesn't ask them."

"…"

I hated to think that this part of her personality might derive from

Deishu Kaiki…but it was the kind of frivolous thing he might very well say.

The same line could have a completely different effect coming from this lovely young girl's lips rather than from that ominous man in his funerary suit, though.

There would be nothing charming about Kaiki saying it…

"Ononoki, why were you inside the UFO Catcher?"

"I was waiting for you. We had an appointment. Isn't it common practice for businesspeople to arrive five minutes early?"

"Well…"

"Or are you an advocate of Hakata time?"

Hakata time refers to being slightly late for an appointment (apparently).

"Or heading a little further south, do you hold to Okinawa time?"

Okinawa time refers to being very late for an appointment (apparently).

"Sorry, monstieur, I don't mean to brag, but I was here fifteen minutes early. Big Sis is like a drill sergeant when it comes to practical life skills."

"Practical life skills…"

What I'd wanted to know was how she got inside that glass case (and furthermore, why she thought it was a good idea to wait for me inside a UFO Catcher), but before I could get an answer, the words "Big Sis" forced me to move on to my second question.

My second question.

Big Sis.

"Ms. Kagenui, she□" As I spoke, my glance darted casually all

around. “Isn’t here, is she? In other words, you’re alone, right, Ononoki?”

“Nope,” she said, pointing her finger at me.

Why’s she pointing at me, I wondered, but her finger arced smoothly upward—to indicate Shinobu.

Which raised the question why’s she pointing at Shinobu, but Ononoki wasn’t pointing at her either.

That finger.

That finger, the vehicle for Ononoki’s finishing move “Unlimited Rulebook” and therefore potentially a most lethal weapon, wasn’t pointing at me, or at Shinobu—but even further above us.

Further above us.

Above us?

But there’s just empty space above Shinobu—I thought as I raised my eyes. The human body isn’t constructed so that you can look directly upwards, but it can look “almost directly up,” which in this case was enough.

Shinobu Oshino, riding on the shoulders of Koyomi Araragi.

A vampire, riding on the shoulders of a human.

And above them both—her.

Yozuru Kagenui.

The latter-day, ultra-violent onmyoji.

Standing on one leg atop Shinobu’s blond mane.

Ms. Kagenui hadn’t even bothered to take her shoes off.

“Make yerselves at home.”

You’re welcome.

009

Shinobu might have lost her power, she might have become a little girl, but in spite of it all she was still proud of her blond hair, and having it trod upon so rudely must have been quite a shock because she ended up sequestering herself inside my shadow.

You could also say that by ditching me like that she was abandoning her role as my buddy, or bodyguard, which would be inexcusable behavior for my trusted partner, but when I considered what a shock it must have been, I didn't have the heart to blame her for it.

Shinobu had been interposed between us, but even if she hadn't been, I'm not so fragile that I'd feel insulted by a woman standing on my head. Nevertheless, the fact is that I was startled□the fact is that I was so startled I jumped.

I'd shot up, shrieking gaaah, but Ms. Kagenui's balance hadn't been thrown off in the slightest, she'd remained perched atop Shinobu's head with a composed look, not moving a muscle□

But hang on, she didn't weigh a thing.

It was like she was floating.

Not like when I say, Shinobu's so tiny, she's light as a feather□nor like Senjogahara, when she'd been stripped of her weight□it just seemed like Ms. Kagenui didn't weigh anything at all. This might not be a particularly apt metaphor, but it was like physically experiencing trompe-l'œil.

If Shinobu was made of paper.

Ms. Kagenui was a paper balloon.

Maybe as a master of the martial arts she can erase her weight by

shifting her center of gravity—indeed a match for Karen's sensei, I thought, trying to force the situation to make sense, but it felt too illogical.

The reasoning was unreasonable, unremittingly unrealistic.

Well.

This was an illogical person I was dealing with.

Despite being more human than anyone—

She was more un-human than anyone.

"First off, mightn't we up stakes and take ourselves someplace else, young man—seems this department store's fixing to close. And darn if I don't have just the place. The ruins of that cram school where you and I had a ball slaughtering each other—"

She didn't seem to be psyching herself up or prettying things up as she said this in her Kyoto dialect—even the disturbing part about "slaughtering each other" came out of her mouth as naturally as could be.

I guess that's how it must be for her…

That's how it is.

Just another day.

Good enough for me, I decided to go along with her suggestion. Having a conversation about aberration-related phenomena after hours in a department store seemed somehow unappealing—it would be a hell of a setting for a ghost story. But the security guard would be coming around, so we couldn't stay there either way. Well, I imagine Ononoki and Ms. Kagenui could, but…

I preferred to avoid a fight scene.

It would be an unmitigated disaster if this turned into a battle. I'd much prefer if we could figure things out calmly and maturely, without incident indecent or otherwise.

That sentiment, that laudable sentiment, might have gone to shit the second the pair showed up, but—anyway.

We left the department store arcade and headed to that ruined cram school so redolent with memories.

That ruined cram school.

The adjective “ruined” had taken on a slightly different nuance after summer break—before, the spot had been occupied by “an abandoned building that used to be a cram school,” still standing even if it was totally rundown (it was inside that abandoned building that Ms. Kagenui and I, and Shinobu and Ononoki, had done battle); but at the end of August, it had burned to the ground, and been reduced to ashes, leaving no trace behind, not even a ruin—so at present, it was what you might call a vacant lot.

Empty land with a “No Trespassing” sign.

Either way, though, visiting that place at night was not for the faint of heart. That much, at least, hadn’t changed—but it was also still devoid of human activity and remained a good location for a confidential conversation.

On the way there, I sized up Ms. Kagenui as she walked ahead of me—or didn’t walk, didn’t set foot on the ground; she rode the whole way on Ononoki’s shoulders.

When you were little, didn’t you play that game on the way to school where you pretend that “the ground is an ocean, and if you step on it you’ll drown”—and the one rule is that you have to stay on top of walls or benches or whatever?

I didn’t know why she did it (I was pretty sure she didn’t really believe she’d drown), but Ms. Kagenui absolutely would not set foot on the ground—the first time I met her, she was standing on top of a mailbox.

At that moment she was riding on Ononoki’s shoulders—not the way I’d been carrying Shinobu a little earlier, but standing dexterously on tiptoe astride them.

When I saw it for the first time over the summer, I was floored by Ononoki's inhuman strength, but having now personally experienced Ms. Kagenui's ability to nullify her weight, I realized she was the extraordinary one. Granted, Ononoki was by no means ordinary herself, but—that said.

Whatever impression it might leave me with and however it worked, aside from her decidedly oddball habit of "taking the high road," which was pretty much impossible to leave aside, the impression I got of Yozuru Kagenui was the same one I'd gotten when I first met her: that of "an attractive woman who was my elder."

Like a dignified teacher.

Or a diligent businesswoman.

At least, she didn't appear to be of the same ilk as the middle-aged man in the Hawaiian shirt and the ominous guy in the funerary suit—she didn't look at all like she would've been friends with them in college.

She didn't, but strictly in terms of dangerousness, she far outstripped either Oshino or Kaiki—far transcended them. Unlike Oshino, who was open to conversation, and Kaiki, whose attention could be bought, there was no dealing with Ms. Kagenui.

And that made her more trouble than any aberration or anyone else—which was precisely why she was an aberration-slaying, aberration-employing onmyoji, I imagine.

The fact that her very appearance on the scene could drive the former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, once the king of aberrations even if she had lost her power, into hiding so easily, so disappointingly quickly—forcing her back into my shadow, spoke to the extent of Ms. Kagenui's true power.

Shinobu was the Aberration Slayer.

But Ms. Kagenui was an expert, known as the Aberration Roller—and specialized in immortal aberrations.

“I□” I began when we reached the vacant land, er, wasteland where the ruins of the cram school had been. There’d been an awkward lack of conversation on the way there. Though maybe I was the only one who found the total silence awkward. “□bid you welcome. You. To my place. Ms. Kagenui.”

“Mm-hmm. Kakakak.”

Her policy of “taking the high road” seemed to allow walking inside buildings (the floor isn’t the ground), but this was just a wasteland, very much the ground, so while she stopped, she didn’t alight from Ononoki’s shoulders, and when she responded she did so from that position.

Ms. Kagenui herself had suggested this place for our talk, and I figured it had probably been her idea of a “fair suggestion”□conducting our consultation in an open space where she couldn’t touch the ground created a “difficult combat environment” for her, so there’d be no sudden eruptions of violence□though if push came to shove, it seemed like that ball was entirely in her court.

Or maybe I was just overthinking it.

But this lady□

“I go wherever I please, my young friend□where I please throughout Japan or this here entire world of ours. Slaying immortal aberrations, as is my wont.”

“…”

Yup.

All this lady wanted to do was kill immortal aberrations.

I didn’t understand why, I didn’t know why, and in fact I didn’t even know if there was a reason in the first place, but Yozuru Kagenui hated immortal aberrations with a passion□despised them.

So consulting with her on this matter was extremely risky, even if I kept various aspects of the situation to myself□she’d come to see

me personally, but I'd have felt much more at ease if she'd just sent Ononoki to act as a kind of carrier pigeon.

It's a sad fact, though, that human beings know the things they hate better than the things they love, which meant that at the moment, whatever form this might take, Ms. Kagenui was unmistakably the most appropriate and logical choice for a consultation.

She of all people could do something.

About my unnatural transformation into a vampire.

Naturally I had high expectations.

"Though of course I'm here now because Gaen-senpai was keen I should come□you've caught her fancy something fierce, I reckon, young man. What'd you do?"

"Nothing…worth mentioning. I haven't done anything, or, I don't remember doing anything. In fact, it's more like she did a bunch of things to, I mean, for me…"

No good.

I sounded way too nervous.

I was obviously on my guard□that is, I was shaking in my boots.

Over summer break, Ms. Kagenui had beaten the living shit out of me right here, though at a different altitude, and I guess my body hadn't forgotten.

Well, since I was asking her for help, I was in no position to be anything but humble towards her, whether I dragged our past enmity into the present or not…

"Hmm… Well, fair enough, I reckon. No need to fuss ourselves over it. You have yourself whatever relationship with Gaen-senpai your little heart desires. And yet, a body□never mind." Ms. Kagenui gave a little shake of her head.

Like she was about to say something but thought better of it.

Or like she cut herself off?

“Enough of that, I’ll not speak on it any further. Whatever plans Gaen-senpai may have, whatever her motives—a body’s just keen to slay immortal aberrations. So long as I’m allowed that, I reckon I’ve no complaints.”

“…”

I doubt she was going to say anything good, but it always nags at me when someone breaks off in mid-sentence, you know?

“Well then? What seems to be the trouble? I find I’ve yet to hear the whole story—I heard tell of an immortal aberration in these parts, so I just dropped everything and hightailed it here.”

“Oh…”

She was operating on some seriously vague information.

To put it another way, this lady seriously wanted to kill some immortal aberrations—she seemed less like an expert and more like an executioner.

Though when it comes to facing a vampire—just like with that trio of specialists—maybe that’s only proper.

But this was really going to make things tough, just like it had been with those three.

“It’ll take a long time to explain everything…or maybe not actually all that long, but can I ask you something first?”

“Anything you please,” Ms. Kagenui said with seeming satisfaction, her overwhelming gaze pouring down on me from on high. Just the difference engendered by Ononoki’s height was enough for it to feel plenty oppressive, and I was like a deer in the headlights.

I had half a mind to call for Shinobu and cajole her into coming out of my shadow so I could make myself taller than Ms. Kagenui, but I gave up on the idea. I could see at a glance that even if I stood on Shinobu’s head, I wouldn’t measure up to Ms. Kagenui.

“You and Ononoki are, well, experts?”

“I reckon we are. Though strictly speaking, it’s me that’s the expert, and Ononoki here is a shikigami, my subordinate, you might say.”

“Which means that you have a price, don’t you?”

A price.

Oshino used to talk about it all the time.

Not that he was an extreme miser like Kaiki, but when it came to the price of his labor, Oshino was severe, or you could say he lacked a spirit of volunteerism, or maybe that he was a stickler he pretty much never did anything for free.

Ms. Gaen wasn’t after money per se, but she demanded payment in kind, which was an even more troublesome bargain than money and this time was no exception. Her price was returning the favor a price of some sort or another was the rule in their business, as far as I could tell.

And if it was a rule, I assumed that even the iconoclastic Yozuru Kagenui would abide by it.

“I won’t beat around the bush… How much will you need? To be frank, I don’t have all that much money.”

“Eh? I’ve no use for filthy lucre, what’s more trouble than it’s worth. I reckon I’m no good with such fiddly calculations. It don’t make no nevermind to me, so get on with your jawing.”

“…”

Total anarchy!

What the hell kind of attitude was that?!

Even an easy-breezy lifestyle has its limits!

Not having to pay was a godsend for a student like me (whatever Shinobu might say, using up a thousand yen on the UFO Catcher

was a hard blow), but danger lurked in that unsociability, and I didn't want to accidentally get too close.

It wasn't that she had no material desires.

She was wearing classy clothes, after all.

Ms. Gaen's payment in kind was plenty frightening, but this "make no nevermind" attitude was frightening in its incomprehensibility. Kaiki's obsession with money was "insufferable," but insufferable was something I could wrap my head around—this was simply "inscrutable."

Insufferable, and inscrutable—similar according to the Nuance Proposition, but…

"Young man, seems as though you've been spending a good deal of time with Yotsugi here, which is plenty good enough for me. But if that won't do for you, then, well, I'd reckon it a kindness if you treated her to some ice cream again next time round."

"Häagen-Dazs." Ononoki had remained silent up to this point, but here she unexpectedly joined in—no need for her to give in to her desires quite so fully, but yeah, when you just come right out and say it like that, it's clear as day. Easy to get.

Made me want to throw in a Klondike Bar along with the Häagen-Dazs.

I wonder, though.

In that sense, Ms. Kagenui's "desire" seemed to me like nothing but the overt bloodlust of wanting to kill immortal aberrations—which was maybe what freaked me out.

"Do you also have a favorite food or anything, Ms. Kagenui? If you do—"

"I don't. So long as it's edible, I'm not fussed about it."

"…"

There was no way in, that is, she acted disinterested in a way that made me think, She really isn't interested in anything but "that," is she.

When most people say they don't have any preferences when it comes to food, you'll turn up an ingredient they really like or a something that puts them off if you hassle them about it long enough, but Ms. Kagenui's curt response gave no such impression, not even a crumb.

Ultimately, she was "scary" not because she was violent or hard to talk to—it struck me at that moment that it was because she lacked the little things that make people human.

Un-human—was that it?

In which case, closing the distance through small talk or attempts to create a friendly atmosphere would be totally futile with her… Sure, not paying a price, not needing to, made me feel ill at ease, but forcing money on someone who didn't want it would be no less weird.

Deciding that my malaise was a personal problem that I would just have to deal with (along with treating Ononoki to some Häagen-Dazs sometime. And I'm not talking about a cup, but a cone), I broached the real subject with Ms. Kagenui.

"It's mirrors."

"Huh?"

"Mirrors—there's no reflection. Of me. In them."

"…"

From that point on, Ms. Kagenui listened to what I had to say without giving any polite encouragement, but also without making fun of me, basically with a serious expression—she heard me out about my half-baked transformation into a vampire that didn't correlate to Shinobu Oshino.

The Aberration Roller was totally absorbed.

“Now I’ve got the picture,” she nodded, after I finally finished speaking. “Your sister. Your little sister. Sounds like she’s fit as a fiddle. Tsukihi Araragi, little Tsukihi.”

“Uh, no, that’s not the point…”

“After listening to you jaw on about all that, how could a body not be concerned about your deviant bath time with little sis? That’s one long bath, I reckon.”

But that aside, said Ms. Kagenui, changing the subject even as she jabbed me where it hurt.

It seemed that even she couldn’t resist quipping about The Battle for the First Bath, but apparently her interests really were confined to immortal aberrations, because she changed the subject almost immediately.

“I’m fixing to ask a few questions, that all right with you?”

“Please do. Ask me anything at all.”

“Just answer best you can remember. When was the last time you reckon you saw your reflection in a mirror?”

“?”

“Listen here, there was likely a mirror in the changing room□when you stripped down to your skivvies out there, did you have a reflection? And in the bathroom itself, surely the mirror wasn’t fogged up right from the get-go. What about when you first got in there? When you were giving your sister a pompadour, for instance, you reckon there was anything then? Or if you don’t remember that too well, how’s about before bed last night? When you were brushing your teeth, or□”

“…”

Now that she was asking these questions, I realized I should’ve thought of them right away. I was so fixated on the mysterious phenomenon of my lack of reflection□that I hadn’t thought about when in the world, when in hell it had started.

Even if I was panicking, that was still pretty negligent of me.

I searched my memory.

I searched—but came up empty. Humans take “having a reflection” for granted, after all, so we don’t pay it any mind.

Even if we’re aware of it in the moment, it’s not going to form a lasting memory—though of course, if I hadn’t had a reflection while I was brushing my teeth the night before, you’d think I would have noticed then and there. I figured we could say I’d still had a reflection at that point.

And probably also when I undressed in the changing room—if I hadn’t had a reflection then, I would’ve noticed. So, I guess.

“We should assume that the last time I had a reflection was right before it happened…I think. Before the mirror got fogged up… So I think the moment in question was the first time I didn’t have a reflection.”

“Hmm…your toenails.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Your nails. Let’s see ’em.”

I let my hands droop like a ghost’s and displayed them to Ms. Kagenui—who grimaced in displeasure and said, “Your toenails.”

Oh right.

Why would Ms. Kagenui be interested in my nail art?

They weren’t even decorated in the first place.

That being said, I honestly didn’t know how to show her my toenail when I was standing in the middle of a vacant lot and she was up in the air on the shoulders of a tween girl.

Well, nothing for it but to improvise since I didn’t have time for a rehearsal… I took off my sneaker, removed my sock, balled the sock

up and put it into the shoe—then, taking a pose like the Y balance in rhythmic gymnastics, I extended my foot towards Ms. Kagenui.

“That’s just about the strangest pose I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

What’s that supposed to mean, you’re the one who asked me!

But before I could even think that, Ms. Kagenui grabbed hold of the foot I’d raised partway off the ground (I hadn’t actually made it to a full Y balance. I’m not that flexible) and pulled it close to her face—I thought I was going to go head over heels, which is to say I almost did go head over heels, but Ms. Kagenui kept that from happening, by brute force.

In other words, she was able to support my entire body weight simply by holding my ankle with one of her hands—just how strong was she?

Maybe they hadn’t exaggerated her brutality in the anime after all.

“Mirrors—”

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s plenty frightening not to have a reflection—sure enough it is, but there’s an aberration what only appears in mirrors as well, I reckon.”

“Ah…you’re right.”

I couldn’t bring a name to mind—but I did recall hearing about ghosts that only appear in mirrors, evil spirits that live in mirrors, aberrations that are themselves mirrors.

There were too many to count.

I don’t think that had anything directly to do with the matter at hand, though, I imagine Ms. Kagenui just brought it up to fill the time while she was examining my toenail.

“What’d that child—that vampire, the former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, have to say about this here toe?”

“Let’s see… That little girl, who’s sulking now thanks to you…said there’d been an infinitesimal fracture that slowly sealed from the inside out, and that the bone was fully healed—that was this morning’s diagnosis.”

“Was it now? This morning, eh? Well, take a looksee.”

“Sorr…eeeeee?”

Ms. Kagenui pulled my leg up even further and shoved the nail right up to my face. My stance was now well past a Y balance, and more like an I balance.

Yes, it hurt.

The joints in my crotch groaned.

Or maybe it was just my voice I was hearing.

“See there. All better.”

“…”

To be frank, the pose was neither stable nor settled enough for me to ascertain the state of something as small as my pinky toenail, but when I forced my eyes up to look at it, sure enough, it seemed to be just as she said. The split in the nail had repaired itself, and the scab was gone.

This may sound a bit overblown when all we’re talking about is a pinky toenail, but—it was definitely a full recovery.

Yes, as though…as though a vampiric healing factor was in effect.

“It’s hard to tell from a purely external examination whether or not a fracture has healed, but we don’t need an X-ray to see that the nail, at least, is back to normal… And it’s definitely out of the question for a nail to repair itself like this in just one day,” I summed up the situation for everyone’s benefit, recapping the parts that added up, and the parts that didn’t. “But the weird thing is, Ms. Kagenui—when I was putting on my socks to leave the house, my toe wasn’t in nearly such good shape. It was pretty much like it’d

been this morning when Shinobu made her diagnosis… Superficially, at least, it hadn't gotten better at all."

"The reason's obvious, oblivious monstieur." This response came not from Ms. Kagenui but from below her, from Ononoki. She extended one finger (probably just out of habit, but knowing the power inherent in that finger made it a terrifying gesture) and pointed at the sky.

At the sky—the night sky.

The dark night sky, the sun having already set.

"Oh, I get it. A vampire's power gets stronger at night—"

"And you've probably gotten plenty of moonlight. Moonbathing, not sunbathing, salves a vampire's wounds. Yaaay."

The instant she said yaaay she got a kick from Ms. Kagenui. It was a violent form of discipline, but I can't say I didn't see where she was coming from.

Not that I'm in much of a position to talk, being partially to blame for that yaaay.

"So that means Shinobu's diagnosis was right. Her deduction that I'm currently in vampire form means…"

It wasn't just regular healing, it was creature-of-the-night healing—vampire healing, in other words. No question about it.

"Well, I'll not render judgment quite yet, I reckon—not having seen the original wound and all. Here now, Yotsugi."

"What is it, Big Sis?"

"Take a gander." With that Ms. Kagenui tugged me around by my ankle once more—not back to my original position, but to an angle slightly lower than that of a Y balance, somewhere in the neighborhood of ninety to a hundred degrees.

And just like that she jammed my bare foot up to Ononoki's face.

Right up to it. She pushed the sole of my foot onto the tween girl's face and rubbed it around, which was pretty kinky in its own way.

I wondered what the onmyoji was doing, if it was to please me or something, but then Ms. Kagenui instructed her familiar to "investigate."

"Okay, okay." With this somewhat recalcitrant response, Ononoki took my ankle from Ms. Kagenui—come on, guys, my leg isn't a relay baton.

Realistically, having it held by Ononoki instead of Kagenui should've been scarier, beyond scary in fact, but at that moment I was somewhat relieved that the baton had passed.

My relief only lasted a few seconds, though, really just the time it took for Ms. Kagenui to pass me off to Ononoki, who quickly put my toe into her mouth like a pacifier. This made even an inveterate veteran like myself quake with fear.

Shinobu tortuously torturing my foot was one thing, but putting it in your mouth and sucking on it? That was something else entirely.

It didn't even tickle.

"It's crunchy."

"Hey, no teeth! No biting, no biting!"

"Don't get so cranky, it's just a pinky toe."

"Cranky—!"

Sensing imminent, potentially fatal danger, I pulled away my leg—while Ms. Kagenui's hold had been so tight that my leg probably would've torn right off, Ononoki, despite holding it with both arms, was so intent on sucking on my toe that I was able to extract myself easily.

"What d'you reckon, Yotsugi?"

"Results pending."

“Well then, Araragi, my boy. While Yotsugi’s processing the flavor of your foot, how’s about we move on to the next step? Your hand, if you please.”

“My hand?”

“Uh huh, just make believe I’m a fortune teller.”

I’d mistakenly offered her my hands when she wanted to see my toenail, couldn’t she just have checked then? Proper sequence is crucial, was that it? Actually, Oshino might have said something along those lines at one point.

Ms. Kagenui’s next step, however, didn’t refer to any crucial sequence.

It was probably about time to stop assuming that she and Oshino had anything in common.

I put out my hand like she asked.

And she took hold of it gently, softly, indeed much like a fortune teller would□so much so, in fact, that I wondered if she actually was going to read my palm, like maybe my palm could elucidate everything about my current situation. But that wasn’t what was going on.

“And a-one, and a-two.”

Ms. Kagenui took my outstretched hand and held my index and middle fingers. Then she bent them back to an untenable angle. So it wasn’t my fingers that she’d counted…

“G…
Gyaaa

It didn't seem like she'd had an opportunity to put up a barrier, but I guess that's the kind of skill you should expect from a disciple (?) of Ms. Gaen's. Not that I had the leeway to be impressed.

I couldn't even work up the energy to ask what she meant by a barrier.

Now, since I've been wounded so many times, and who even knows how many times I've died, you'd think I'd be accustomed to pain. But pain isn't something you ever get accustomed to. When a vampire's wound heals, it "goes back to the way it was," just like for a normal person; when you break a bone, it's not like it gets stronger than it was originally.

So I didn't hold back. I collapsed and, just as Ms. Kagenui had offered, writhed screaming on the ground.

"Owwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww! Wh-Wh-What are you doing, Ms. Kagenui! You can't suddenly owowowow□"

"Now this won't do at all. Don't only writhe around down there□turn your mind to healing those fingers for a spell. Believe that they'll heal. This is a test of your healing ability."

"T-Test?"

So then□

This act of violence, this unforgivable brutality, was just Ms. Kagenui's version of Shinobu scratching me with her claws□just a trial of my body's ability to heal itself?

Fine, I saw how this step couldn't come first, but hold on a goddamn second.

She was more ferocious than any aberration.

"You've got to put your mind to the grindstone. Think of your fingers healing, conceive of it. Look here, those fingers are on your right hand, aren't they? And the way I broke them, the way they broke, it'll take them plenty more than a few piddling months to

heal. You won't be able to get back to a little thing called exam prep with fingers like that, now, will you, unless you heal them yourself."

"Guh…"

Not exactly the best motivation.

In fact, broken fingers were a great excuse not to study□well, I'm injured, nothing I can do about it.

Never underestimate a high school student's desire to slack off.

Plus, without a better motivation for wanting to heal my broken fingers ASAP□I could die from the pain. Maybe broken fingers didn't kill you, but the pain was killing me.

I mean, the fucking color they were turning.

What did you do to them, Ms. Kagenui?

Forget a few months, these fingers wouldn't heal in a lifetime.

"G…
uuuu

Apparently, though, this incentive was more than adequate; it was perfect. My two fingers, which had turned a blackish purple thanks to internal hemorrhaging, healed instantaneously—went back to normal.

“Just how pubescent are you?” Ms. Kagenui said, smiling despite her words.

Wasn’t she a broadminded sis. Not even appalled.

“But thank you kindly for demonstrating your healing factor, your manner of regenerating. Now, Yotsugi, a body’s keen to hear the results of your inspection.”

“Results still pending…I’m about 84 percent done. I’ve got the basic picture, though. Big Sis Shinobu’s interpretation that he’s become a vampire is probably correct. But…”

“But?”

Thanks for the worrisome conjunction.

“But—no, I can’t say the rest.”

“Hey, you’re making me worry,” I butted in. “Why’re you acting like that?”

“For my part, I’d rather talk to your parents first if possible.”

“…”

Ononoki was as expressionless as a doll, as a corpse, so it was always impossible to tell if she was being serious, but I really hoped this was a joke.

I felt like I was being sentenced.

“So…that’s a joke, right, Ononoki? You’re kidding,” I tried to confirm.

“Um, the bit about your parents, yes… But maybe you’d better call Big Sis Shinobu. Get her out of her hidey-hole in your shadow. I’d

like to get that demon's opinion on this one."

"I reckon that's a good idea," seconded Ms. Kagenui. "If I ruffled her feathers by standing on her head earlier, I'll happily apologize, so come now, young man, summon the former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade."

"Okay…"

That all made good sense. I had some things I wanted to ask my buddy as well, so I had no reason to refuse their request. But then, I'd already used up my trump card that morning.

If I lured her out with fictitious donuts twice in one day, I really might end up donutized□when night fell, she would've regained some of her power, maybe enough to put a hole in me if she wanted.

Therefore.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Kagenui, but if I'm going to do that, do you mind if I make a quick run to Mister Donut first?"

"What in tarnation?!"

A comeback in Kansai dialect!

Now, that was a treat.

"Don't waste my time, young man, call her out of there lickety-split. I'll not wait around. If it seems like it's fixing to take too long, I might just stick my hand into your shadow and pull her out like some intestines."

"Like some intestines?"

Was that a common figure of speech to go with "pull out"?

"I'm of a mind to rip that whole head of blond hair out at the□hm?"

Before Ms. Kagenui could complete whatever disturbing thought she was about to express, Shinobu Oshino finally appeared from

within my shadow. Good timing, almost as if she'd heard what Ms. Kagenui was saying.

Unlike this morning when she popped out all lively with her fist in the air, this time she rose out solemnly with great pomp and circumstance. She'd even revamped her outfit into some kind of classy dress.

Her eyes seemed puffy, and knowing her as I did, I wanted to ask her if she'd been crying herself a river in there, but as she made her entrance, arms folded, her chin thrust high in the air so she could look down her nose at us, that gruesome smile plastered on her face, there was no way I could rib her about it.

"Ah, the former Heartunderblade. Sorry 'bout having the audacity to stand on your head earlier and all."

"…"

"…"

"…"

Man, could she not read a room.

Some grown-up.

Sorry 'bout? Come on. And she didn't seem the least bit contrite… This is just a guess, but I bet Ms. Kagenui never once in her life admitted that she was wrong.

"K…Kakak."

Nevertheless, Shinobu did her best to laugh.

Such courage, it brought tears to your eyes.

"Kakak. It seems as though thine investigation of my master hath reached its conclusion. Ye have my thanks for carrying it out in my stead. I suppose 'tis true what they say, that to everything there is a season, if even ones such as you can be of use to my lord."

“Hahaha, my apologies. Truly, for having driven you to such ludicrously untoward posturing. That was never my intent. Your head simply seemed a likely place to come in for a landing.”

“…”

Enough already.

Daring to read other people’s minds when you can’t even read the room.

Seemed a likely place to come in for a landing… This was probably the first time in her almost six hundred years that someone had made that particular remark to Shinobu, and there was no question that it was an almost unthinkable insult.

“Ka…kak.”

And yet she laughed. What backbone. Or she’d missed her chance to back down, more like.

“W-Watch thy tongue, human□an expert ye may be, and an expert in immortal aberrations at that, but do not for a moment think that means thou knowest aught of me. Forget not, the only reason I have not slain thee on the spot is so that thou might help resolve this physical malady that besets my lord and master. Kakak.”

“Which is exactly why I’m apologizing to you, for stepping on your head and all. For someone so short, you sure are long on pride. Come on, now, let’s bury the hatchet. You nightwalkers are such gloomy folk. I’m real sorry, I’ll be sure never to step on your head again.”

“…”

Gritting her teeth, Shinobu finally fell silent.

This was where I put on the brakes, worried that she might stay silent for months like she did last time. “Stop it, Ms. Kagenui, please.”

At this, Ms. Kagenui looked stunned□apparently, she hadn’t been

trying to be mean and just didn't have a clue. What an unpleasant person.

Everyone—and I mean everyone, even Kaiki—disliked her.

"You too, Shinobu, let it drop. No sense in opening up old wounds."

"Y-Yet…"

Don't clutch my sleeve with those tear-filled eyes.

It's simply too pathetic. And adorably sympathetic.

"You bravely volunteered your own head," I told her, "to protect mine from the tread of Ms. Kagenui's feet. That was a selfless act of devotion and personal sacrifice. You can rest easy, your pride is intact, okay?"

"Huh? Oh, aye! 'Twas just as thou sayest, I protected thee, my lord. I am badass indeed!"

Her mood improved in an instant—pathetic, adorable, but also a pain in the ass and kind of a dodo.

"I can't believe I lost to her…" muttered Ononoki, but Shinobu seemed to be on cloud nine and didn't hear her. Thank God for small favors. Favors both large and small aside, everyone besides Ms. Kagenui was having a shitty time.

"Well now," she said, "we have all the players, we have all the information—time for all the answers, I reckon. It won't do to leave the readers with a mystery, so let's get to the solution, shall we? Time to solve the riddle."

"Solve the riddle…"

Something about her words bothered me.

My lack of a reflection wasn't a riddle, it was just something that was happening…

"Excellent. Proceed," urged Shinobu.

Her mood improved, she seemed to be feeling generous—well, she'd tasted the humiliation of being stepped on, but I imagine that the erstwhile king of aberrations still had so much self-confidence, not to say self-conceit, that Ms. Kagenui and Ononoki had nothing on her. Whether or not her self-image held water was a different question.

"Koyomi Araragi—kind monster sir," Ononoki began. "You are, at present—or in the present progressive, turning into a vampire little by little by little. That's, well, the situation."

"Turning into a vampire…"

"From human to vampire, little by little. I believe it's what biologists call metamorphosis, Latin mutatis, Japanese hentai. Hmm, only too appropriate for you, monstieur."

"…"

Was I supposed to laugh?

Not on your life.

My turn to be expressionless.

But it didn't come as a surprise, Shinobu's inspection that morning having already told me as much, and Ms. Kagenui's inspection (if that's what you want to call that outburst of violence) having just confirmed it.

"Turning into a vampire… Mm-hmm."

"How now, young man. You don't seem particularly put out."

"Well, I've become a vampire so many times at this point… I'm obviously not going to be as freaked out as I was the first time, over spring break. I don't want to brag in front of experts like yourselves, but I've had more on my plate over the past year than you might think…"

The past few months in particular had been pretty extreme.

The stuff with Hachikuji, the stuff with Sengoku□

And.

That transfer student.

“I’m sure you have,” Ononoki agreed.

In an insinuating tone.

“You held that plate out like a moron.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” the familiar shook her head.

Her barb, loaded with a scathing sarcasm that could only have come from Kaiki, was too indirect, too roundabout, for me to understand what she was getting at.

When I said I didn’t want to brag, was I actually bragging? Had an expert been offended by the remarks of a noob who was still in high school? No, Ononoki wasn’t the type.

Whatever the case, the fact that her personality was different every time we met made her tricky to deal with. It’s hard to get accustomed to such a mercurial character.

“Don’t be so harsh on the boy, Yotsugi. I’ll not deny the young man here may have behaved moronically, but I reckon some part of that responsibility lies with us,” Ms. Kagenui covered for me, if that’s what she was doing, for whatever reason□okay, fine, I have no clue what she was pulling there.

Suddenly I realized it was past nine o’clock.

Sure, everything had taken a while, but our meeting had been set for seven.

Could we get to it already?

“As for why you’re metamorphosing, monstieur. As for why the

hentai is being perverted into a vampire…”

Not gonna let that one drop, huh?

What’s the deal, got a bone to pick with me?

“It has nothing to do with your interrelationship with the former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade□I think you probably already knew that, but it’s important enough that it bears repeating.”

“Nothing to do with Shinobu…but can I really be turning into a vampire independent of the fact that she used to be one?”

“You can. There’s one last thing I want to clarify. Sis,” Ononoki turned to Shinobu, “do you really not have some inkling? Of why□this is happening to kind monster sir, your lord, your master?”

Shinobu seemed displeased. “Had I, I would not stoop to asking the likes of thee for aid.”

“And Oshino never said a word about it?” asked Ms. Kagenui.

“Nay. ’Tis true that I cannot recall everything he spoke of□most of it washed over me like a cool breeze, but had he touched on something of such dire import, I would remember.”

“I reckon you would,” Ms. Kagenui took Shinobu’s somewhat cocky remark in stride. “Yes indeedy, I reckon even Oshino missed this one. It was irregular, or, an oversight. If he’d known things were going to go this way, he’d never have let such misgivings go unheeded.”

“An oversight? Oshino? Is that even possible? How can that be, how can a guy who acted like he saw through everything□”

An oversight.

Just thinking about it freaked me out.

“He didn’t really,” Ms. Kagenui corrected me. “And for what it’s worth, he might see through to the truth of the matter but not take

care of it for you. He's like Gaen-senpai in that way. Strict, or businesslike when it comes to that sort of thing, wont to operate solely on the basis of profit and loss. If'n you ask me, even a capricious contrarian like Kaiki at least has a little more warmth to him."

"…"

I had some reservations about calling it "warmth," but true, while a pain in the ass about money, Kaiki's petty accounting was also very human.

"Still and all, I reckon this time around it was nothing but a plain old oversight—in other words, it was opaque to Mister All-Seeing, to Mèmè Oshino."

"Opaque—to Oshino."

Saying those words out loud made me realize just how anomalous they felt. Maybe it was plausible to Ms. Kagenui, who'd known Oshino since college and seen her share of his failures, but to me, after everything he'd done for me this year—after watching him "see through" everything time and time again, it sounded like a bad joke.

A bad joke. A bad reality.

A bad—paranormal phenomenon.

"Isn't that a big deal? Something that's never happened before is happening in my body—something unprecedented, something that my accumulated experience is useless in dealing with—"

"Keep your shirt on. It's certainly unusual, that much is true. For Oshino's predictions and judgments to be wrong, I mean—but still, young man, it's a hoot to see you so shocked by it."

"A h-hoot?"

I guess from Ms. Kagenui's perspective as a fellow specialist and old friend of Oshino's, my level of shock seemed pretty ridiculous—no need to come right out and say it, though.

It hurt my feelings.

Man is she oblivious, I started to think, but apparently that wasn't what was going on since Ms. Kagenui went on to say:

"But the fact that this particular matter was opaque to Oshino was entirely your fault."

"…? Huh?"

I was shocked again, if you want to talk about shocked, but more than that, I was bewildered.

I simply didn't understand what she meant, but if she was saying that Koyomi Araragi was opaque to Mèmè Oshino, that was impossible.

I was like a flimsy piece of tracing paper to him—so transparent you could see right through to the other side.

I had always been the insubstantial, weak Koyomi Araragi to him.

Always and forever, consistently—I had never once stymied his predictions. I'm not like Hanekawa. And not even she threw him off all the time—

"Please tell me what you mean, Ms. Kagenui. How did I throw Oshino off his game? I think you must be wrong about that… But if something of the sort happened—I need to know."

"I'll let you know the moment I do. That's what I've come here to find out—but one thing's certain, there's trouble brewing. We could very well—that is, if things keep on this way…"

Me and Yotsugi here. We might have no choice but to kill you, she stated.

She did so without lowering her voice or changing her tone perceptibly, as though it was just part of the natural flow of the conversation.

"…"

“No choice but to kill you if things go south, that is. Now then, young man. It’s easy as pie to see why your body’s metamorphosing into a vampire’s why you’re clearly headed in that direction. Honestly, it doesn’t take an expert, it’s so simple you should’ve figured it out all by your lonesome.”

You could’ve been self-aware enough to awake to the reality, she chided.

“What, do you mean?”

“You turned into a vampire too much.”

Ms. Kagenui said this in, you guessed it, the exact same tone and from there, Ononoki took over, you guessed it, expressionlessly, speaking in her overwhelmingly placid voice.

“You just kept piling more on your plate you moron. In the course of solving all those problems, you relied too much on your power as a vampire, and so, irrespective of the former Heartunderblade, your immortal soul inexorably ended up approaching vampiredom.”

“Approaching ”

“You’ve been literally transforming yourself into a vampire.”

010

It may be a little late at this point to insert “the story so far.” It feels like I missed the window, and frankly it’s a total embarrassment as a narrator—but if I’m going to explain everything in proper sequence, it’s got to be now or never.

Where to begin? I guess it’s got to be spring break—that hellish spring break.

Or no, strictly speaking, just before it started?

That bloodsucking spring when I was attacked by a vampire, when I became a vampire—up until then I had somehow managed to make my way down the road of humanity, sometimes unsteady on my feet, sometimes going off course of course, but that spring I strayed entirely.

That was about a year ago.

Once I became a vampire, it was neither a kinslaying vampire nor a half-vampire nor a vampire-hunting spec ops team who saved me—but a heaven-sent class president with braids and glasses, and an older guy in a Hawaiian shirt.

And I became human once more, a demon no longer.

Give or take a few lingering after-effects.

And they all lived happily ever after.

Except when they didn’t.

I’ve already told you all of this, so let’s skip ahead a month—to Golden Week. The end of April and into the beginning of May—a nightmare. Tsubasa Hanekawa, who’d played a central role in restoring my humanity, was bewitched by a cat.

It took more than a spritz of water in the face to repel that malicious, murderous feline assault on Hanekawa□on the world itself. I did it by exploiting my vampiric power.

The might of a vampire.

I employed the vampiric strength that I lost over spring break, which you'd think I would've abhorred, that power I risked my life to escape, and defeated the cat□well, temporarily sealed it away, anyway.

Incidentally, I regained my vampiric power by giving my blood to Shinobu. By letting the little girl bite me in the neck. It all comes down to this. At the time, Shinobu was not yet bound in my shadow, so I had to give her blood at regular intervals, but on that occasion I let her exceed her usual dosage□and so was able to turn into a vampire, or more precisely, a thrall of the Aberration Slayer.

I was able to□for better or for worse.

But then, during the subsequent school term□when Oshino was still around, in other words□the only time I really used my vampiric power was that time with Kanbaru, the thing with her and the monkey.

With Senjogahara, who met a crab.

With Hachikuji, waylaid by a snail.

With Sengoku, entangled by a snake.

Not to mention the second time Hanekawa was bewitched by the cat□on each occasion I dealt with the aberration-related phenomenon in question solely as a human being.

If Ononoki was right and I in fact leaned too hard on my power as a vampire, it had to be later on□like when Karen Araragi was stung by a bee.

When she was stung by a bee thanks to Kaiki's scheming□I used my vampiric healing factor to absorb some of the blistering fever that wracked her body.

And then it was Tsukihi's turn.

The matter both concerning and involving Tsukihi—it was Obon, and that was when it came to blows with Ms. Kagenui and Ononoki. In order to battle the Aberration Roller, slayer of immortal aberrations, I transformed myself into an immortal aberration. A vampire.

To tell the truth, even having commandeered the strength of a vampire, I was no match for Ms. Kagenui—but regardless, that must've been the inflection point.

When I stopped being human.

And began metamorphosing into a vampire.

A rapid-fire series of aberration-related phenomena cropped up since the last day of summer break and throughout second term—and each time, to deal with them, I turned into an immortal vampire.

I got used to using my vampiric power, relying on my vampiric power, wielding my vampiric power to deal with these unreliable and unwieldy aberration-related phenomena—sometimes I even used it to deal with other things.

I leaned on it most heavily when Sengoku was entangled by a snake for the second time—no, when she was the one who entangled the snake.

That was when it really started.

I wanted to save Sengoku.

So I turned into a vampire almost every day hoping to resolve the situation—which wasn't very effective as it turned out, and in fact effectively one hundred percent counter-productive, but anyway, that went on for a month, two months.

And that brings us to the present moment.

The present situation.

The present phenomenon.

“Basically, monstieur, you spent too much time as an immortal aberration. You overdid it, blithely bouncing back and forth like that. I imagine that as far as you were aware, you weren’t ‘overdoing’ anything, let alone ‘blithely,’ but still…” said Ononoki.

I sensed something like sympathy in her tone, but that had to be my own self-serving imagination□she was speaking in her quiet, placid voice like always.

Placid, and expressionless.

“No…I did do it blithely.”

I had to admit it.

I had to acknowledge it.

It wasn’t the first time someone pointed this out to me□Senjogahara and Hanekawa and others from the female camp had warned that I was blithely over-relying on my power as an immortal ever since Oshino’s disappearance.

Not that I was self-aware about it.

But it was definitely true that any reluctance I’d once felt about using my vampiric power□about becoming immortal, had slowly but surely faded. Not only that, but I felt a strange sense of connection every time I used my vampiric power to fight alongside a reinvigorated Shinobu.

Euphoria?

Well, there was certainly some of that.

Of course there was.

Anyone with a pulse would feel the same way.

Any average high school student who got to wield a power that transcends the human realm, transcends human knowledge, and

denies the thrill of it would be full of it—as would anyone who denies getting lost in all that power.

“So you’re saying that because I borrowed Shinobu’s strength too frequently, I myself fully transformed into a vampire? But I was being so careful to avoid that!”

Oshino had cautioned me over and over again, after all: to maintain Shinobu’s existence in this world, I had to keep giving her my blood in perpetuity, but I also needed to be super-careful about the dosage.

He strictly enjoined me that if I gave her too much, if I let her drink too much blood, Shinobu would become an aberration once again—the aberration-slaying king of aberrations.

At the same time.

He enjoined me (just as strictly) that I would transform into a vampire as well. So even when I let Shinobu drink my blood so I could fight, I never once exceeded the proper threshold—at least I didn’t think I did.

“You’re not listening, it’s not about your relationship with Big Sis Shinobu. It’s totally unrelated to you giving her your blood. Well, it’s indirectly related, of course, but…the why and how and who-drank-your-blood of your transformations into a vampire isn’t really the issue. Until now you’ve been ‘metamorphosing’ by borrowing Big Sis Shinobu’s power, but it would’ve been the same if you’d borrowed from a different vampire each time.”

“…”

“Let me give it to you straight, monstieur. I’ll put it as plainly as I can. It’s not that you became a vampire too often, it’s that you became too comfortable about becoming one. You got too used to using the power. You got too good at it—at this point you could become a vampire even without Shinobu.”

“Wait.”

Wait a sec.

I couldn't keep up—no, that wasn't true, I was keeping up, or in fact, I'd finished the upkeep on my mental filing cabinet a while ago. I was convinced. So if this were somebody else's problem, I would've totally agreed with her here. I'd probably have praised her to the skies: Great deduction, Ononoki.

But this was my problem.

No matter how true, if it was also tragic, if it was also a failure I didn't want to acknowledge—I couldn't swallow it just like that.

"But Ononoki. Is it…is it really that easy to become a vampire? You just do it too much, get too used to doing it, and then you've done it?"

"Dance with the devil, and you'll become the devil—play with a demon, and you'll become a demon. And you really took the initiative playing that game."

"I…didn't feel like I was playing."

"Of course you didn't, young man, that's just a manner of speaking. You were dead serious. I reckon I can vouch for that myself, having battled you in your vampire form. Otherwise, a body wouldn't have backed off," Ms. Kagenui, silent all this time, finally interjected.

Well, Ononoki was only ever acting as her mouthpiece anyway, and as her familiar the opinions she expressed were most likely hers and Ms. Kagenui's, there being no difference between the two.

"Or maybe I ought to say you were seriously off your rocker. It might sound strange for me to go around jawing about what's normal, but normal sure as shooting doesn't include becoming a monster to protect your little sister."

"…"

"Listen, young man, this might seem to you like it's coming out of left field, but it's not as uncommon as all that—it's not easy, but it's not all that uncommon either. There are even those among us experts what end up becoming aberrations themselves. It's a particularly marked tendency among my closest colleagues, by

which I mean onmyoji. Which is why, to avoid it," Ms. Kagenui's gaze dropped to Ononoki beneath her feet.

A chilly gaze, her eyes cold.

"I employ this here stand-in."

"…"

"That's how dangerous facing an aberration head-on can be—Oshino must've told you? That once you've dealt with an aberration, you're much more liable to get drawn in again."

He did tell me that, yes.

But what he didn't tell me…

"If I transformed into a vampire too often, I'd end up as one myself—that, he never mentioned."

"Because he failed to see it. What kind of a person you are, I mean. That was where he miscalculated. No, maybe never calculated at all—can't miscalculate if you never calculated in the first place. Sure enough, that's why I say it was an oversight. He never predicted that you, young man, would transform into a vampire so frequently in such a short span."

"That…"

That definitely wasn't a miscalculation—nor was it an oversight.

Uh-uh.

That was an error in judgment.

"So you're saying…I betrayed Oshino's faith in me? Is that what it boils down to? He never expected me to do it. To keep on borrowing the power of an immortal aberration so blithely—to rely too much on a vampire—"

Shinobu.

He entrusted the former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade to me, entrusted her to my shadow, and I betrayed that trust.

I couldn't live up to his expectations.

Shinobu's power, Shinobu's existence.

I used them like convenient tools—and that was something not even he could've seen.

Which is why he never informed me of this possibility.

Nor did he inform—Shinobu.

He almost certainly.

Thought it'd be rude.

"…"

"'Course, we can only guess at what Oshino's intentions might've been—for all we know, he just plumb forgot. And what about this, young man: supposing he'd told you about this possibility, would you have shrunk from making use of the vampire's power? Even if you'd known it would cost you your humanity, you'd've done it anyway, no?"

Words of comfort.

Were something I'd never expect to hear from Ms. Kagenui. She was too violent, too careless, too oblivious. Probably she was just thinking out loud.

There's really no way of knowing what I would've done.

If I'd known beforehand, maybe I could've done something about it, or maybe I'd have been well and truly scared off.

"So you're saying the reason my healing factor is so slow…or that I have a healing factor at all, even if it's non-existent compared to when I was Shinobu's thrall over spring break, the fact that I have some level of immortality, is proof that my transformation into a

vampire is unconnected to Shinobu? In other words, I'm not transforming into Shinobu's thrall, but into my own brand□my own breed of vampire."

"That's about the size of it. Though, typologically speaking, I reckon you'd be treated as a natural vampire."

"There are two types of vampires, monstieur. Two breeds. Natural vampires, and human beings who become vampires after being bitten by one□it might seem like you belong in the latter category, but as it happens you're classified as the former. Someone who transforms into a vampire, who becomes one, is a natural vampire."

"I don't really understand that reasoning…"

I never really understood what I was told over spring break either, but this seemed even more confusing.

Or rather, viewing vampires as organisms and trying to understand their ecology already seemed outside the framework of human understanding.

"Seems like the incident involving the serpent deity was the biggest problem□you really, really, really, really, really overdid it there, monstieur□you turned into a vampire almost every day. 'High frequency' doesn't even begin to cover it. You spent more time as a vampire than you did as a human during that period, didn't you?"

"Sure…"

It was my fault that Sengoku had done that□that she ended up like that. Or I felt responsible, at least□so that's why.

That's why.

"I think I've got some kind of grasp of the situation. I wouldn't call it a firm grip, but…what do I do, Ononoki?"

"Do about what?" she threw the question back to me so ingenuously that I fell silent for a moment□and a bad feeling washed over me, but I quickly dispelled it, interpreting her response as a request to be more specific. I rephrased my question.

“What do I do to become human again?”

When was it?

It must’ve been over spring break that I’d asked Shinobu more or less the same question—what had her answer been?

Whatever, that was the past.

How she answered back then was irrelevant—what I needed to know.

And the one thing I knew I didn’t want to hear—was Ononoki’s hopeless reply.

“Kind monster sir,” she said.

Like a doll, looking at me with those doll’s eyes.

Without hesitation or consideration.

“There’s no way to fix this.”

011

No way to fix it.

No way back.

It struck me as odd that when I heard Ononoki's cruel pronouncement, when I heard that hopeless answer condemning me to my fate□I accepted it readily.

I accepted it.

Without shock or consternation.

Her answer touched something in me.

Something deep inside of me.

Or no, maybe not quite□it's not like it was totally unsurprising. It was definitely not what I thought she was going to say. But it was the kind of surprise you feel when you happen to put a piece of a jigsaw puzzle in exactly the right place, or when you open a dictionary to precisely the page you're looking for. I was startled by how "right" it felt.

"I see…" I nodded.

The one most likely to mock this response, in all its stiff-upper-lip gallantry, was none other than me. Who're you trying to impress? I wanted to ask.

Like when someone gets hit by a car and says, I'm fine.

"So that's the deal, huh? Well, there it is, then."

"I expected you'd be a mite more upset about it," Ms. Kagenui, eyeing me doubtfully, said from atop Ononoki's shoulders. "We're

still inside the barrier, you know. You don't want to roll around on the ground for a spell and bawl your eyes out? Wail your frustrations at the heavens? Go on, I'll pretend I didn't hear nor see a blessed thing."

"No… Well."

When you stopped to think about it, this wasn't a question of a mere broken finger—I'd been informed that I was dropping out of the human race, never to return. I wasn't just losing some part of myself, I was losing my very humanity, so there'd be no shame in rolling around on the ground and crying for a while.

And yet.

I felt absolutely no need to do so.

"What can I say. It's like, There you go. Guess that makes sense."

"…"

"I mean, I've been really reckless these past six months. It was the same when we fought each other… I was turning myself into a vampire like it was nothing, like I was drinking an energy drink or something, relying on the power of an immortal to battle aberrations. And the retribution for that…"

Retribution?

That's what I said, but somehow it didn't sound right.

Why, I couldn't say…or no, it sounded wrong because there was a better word for it.

It wasn't retribution.

The price.

"I had to pay some kind of price."

Yes, a price.

I'd been cooking the books, and the secret finally came out—that morning it finally came out, finally came into view (or, not).

That's all. No biggie.

I was actually surprised it'd taken so long.

I was just paying interest—on all the bills that had come due recently.

I was just settling the accounts for all my shenanigans.

No—

This was the last installment, the final payment.

Last year was over, even according to the traditional calendar—and Koyomi Araragi needed to wrap up his fiscal year.

That's all there was to it.

"Price, right," repeated Ms. Kagenui disinterestedly. Her expression suggested that maybe she'd wanted to watch me writhe around on the ground for her sadistic delectation. "Well, what else could you expect, throwing around all that power willy-nilly—no choice but to accept it, I reckon. Not that that ever-so-enlightened attitude of yours will do a lick of good. Still and all, I reckon you haven't lost your humanity just yet."

"What…do you mean?"

"There's no way to reverse the process, no way to fix it, but there's a way to keep your transformation into a vampire from progressing." Ms. Kagenui prompted Ononoki, seemingly telling her to pick up the thread of the explanation. As onmyoji and shikigami, they really seemed to have some kind of psychic link.

"Okay. So, there is a method, monstieur."

"By a 'method' you mean a way not to lose any more of my humanity?"

“Well, yeah… Yeah. We’ll have to conduct a thorough, by-the-book examination to find out how vampiricized you are, kind monster sir, and how much of your humanity you retain. But either way, there’s a way for you to maintain the current status quo, whatever that turns out to be.”

“…”

I didn’t ask right away what this method might be because I somehow felt like that’d be greedy.

Like it’d be shady, as if I were trying to default on my loans—sure, I’d talked like I was at peace with it, but ultimately, given my predicament, I had to find out what this method was, if there really was one.

“So what is it, Ononoki? What’s the method?”

“Mmmm… Maybe ‘method’ wasn’t the best way to describe it, since it doesn’t really involve you doing anything. In other words,” continued Ononoki, “You just have to stop using your vampiric power.”

“…”

“You can keep feeding Big Sis Shinobu, of course—using your shadow as a battery charger like you’ve been doing should be fine. If that’s as far as it goes, then there’s no problem. But you’ve got to keep an even keel, and of course you’ve got to avoid actually transforming into a vampire. No matter what.”

“Stop using my vampiric power…”

Definitely not what you’d call a method.

It didn’t even require any action on my part.

Though that didn’t mean it would be easy.

If anything, it sounded like a detox program—would it be that easy to wean myself off of vampiric immortality, given how handy it’d been?

And there was no question that, having so fecklessly immersed myself in the world of aberrations, I'd continue to be involved with them, to get sucked into their orbit.

Even now they were dragging me down.

"Supposing," I sprang a totally unnecessary question on Ononoki for the sake of confirmation. "Supposing from now on I kept on using the power of immortality every time I had to deal with an aberration, what'd happen to me then?"

"You know what would happen don't make me say it, not to a friend. You'd edge closer and closer to being a vampire. I can't say for sure how many more chances you've got but you definitely have less wiggle room than you think, monstieur."

"I'm not thinking about wiggle room or more chances or anything, that would be too optimistic, but…"

But.

Supposing there was something something I absolutely had to do, while I was still human, while I could still maintain my humanity, that required the power of a vampire.

Could I really refrain from using it?

I couldn't help but envision such a scenario.

But Ms. Kagenui's next words wiped such visions from my mind. "Best not to speak any more on it, best not to think any more on it. I declared this to you before…and it was a declaration of war: if you transform into an immortal aberration even once more, even one more iota, it will be my professional duty to kill you. I will have no choice but to slay you. Even now you're on the brink of vampiredom you might call your current status 'a somewhat vampiric human being,' but if that balance should tip any further… Need I say more?"

"…"

I'd been able to get a grasp on my current situation thanks to Ms.

Gaen so swiftly dispatching Ms. Kagenui and Ononoki to meet me—but while that was an expression of Ms. Gaen's kindness and goodwill, it was also her way of driving the point home.

That's the kind of person she was.

She dispatched Ms. Kagenui knowing that the onmyoji was not only knowledgeable about all things immortally aberrant but also inordinately obsessed with destroying them.

The harsh reality was that Ms. Gaen had dispatched Ms. Kagenui under the assumption that if my transformation into a vampire exceeded the limits of what Ms. Kagenui felt she could let slide—she would exterminate me right then and there. Naturally, I wanted to believe that Ms. Gaen deemed that unlikely, but…

"Just so's you know, I've let you and the former Heartunderblade go on account of Oshino requesting that I certify you as harmless—but as it stands, you're right on the line. One step over, young man—or even if I just get the notion one day, I'm liable to put you down."

"…"

If she just got the notion, huh…

"One more time should be fine, I'll make an exception just this once—you start thinking like that, slipping back into the occasional transformation, and you'll be in my crosshairs just like that. Or, no. No no no. I'll act the second I judge you to lack the proper self-control. Though if you're apt to step out of line sooner or later, I reckon the proper thing might just be to take care of business right here and now."

"Do so and I shall slay thee on the spot, Madam Expert."

Shinobu broke her long silence then—in contrast with Ms. Kagenui's somewhat indifferent attitude and Ononoki's expressionlessness, she was brimming with fearsome emotion.

Animosity spilling over the sides of the words she unleashed.

"Should my lord and master die, or be slain, then would I be

released from my bondage—and with my full power returned to me, I too would become thy target.”

“So you would. Yes, you would indeed. And you and I would come to blows, then, I reckon—your harmless certification being revoked at that point and all.”

Ms. Kagenui returned Shinobu’s murderous stare without an ounce of fear; in fact, she was smiling. While they may have been at odds over summer break, the two never actually fought one another—which of them would win such a battle was anybody’s guess.

The standoff dragged on for a while, the tension so thick I couldn’t even speak, but eventually Ononoki dispelled it with the reasonable question, “Aren’t we getting a little ahead of ourselves, Big Sis? Big Sis Shinobu? What’s the point of getting heated about it now?”

Speaking up in that situation, interjecting that aloof if reasonable question, had to be Kaiki’s influence—and I felt a grudging sense of gratitude towards him.

If they started fighting it out at that moment, I’d have absolutely no way of stopping them without using my vampiric power.

Though I probably wouldn’t be able to stop them even then…

“Sorry, kind monster sir. As you can see, my Big Sis is surprisingly quick-tempered, quick to jump to conclusions, and quick to tire of long-term talk. So even though she’s older, you can’t expect her to take you under her wing. That is, I hope not taking you under her wing is as far as it goes. And that’s why I have a favor to ask of you, kind monster sir. As a friend…I want you to promise me right here and now that you will never, ever, ever use your vampiric power again—I want you to swear that no matter what hardships you face, you’ll act without recourse to the power of immortality. That you’ll live out the rest of your life as a human being.”

I want you to swear. To live a human life, Ononoki summed up placidly.

“…”

“I’m a shikigami, after all. If Big Sis ordered me to, I’d have no choice but to fight, even if it was against you, monstieur—I have my personal feelings, but that’s as far as it goes. That’s how I was made.”

“Ononoki…”

“You’ve already had a healthy dose of immortality, isn’t that enough? Take my word for it as a corpse, immortality isn’t all it’s cracked up to be…even if you take us out of the equation. As it is, you’re teetering on the edge, but you’re still human…or you can pass for human, anyway.”

Pass for human.

What a choice of words.

Coming from a doll who herself was only passing for human.

“No reflection, slightly accelerated healing—if that’s all it is, you should be able to pull it off. Think of your formerly weightless girlfriend, or your friend with the monkey’s arm—for now, you can just go back to studying for exams. Let’s see, I imagine if you don’t show up in mirrors you won’t show up in photographs either, but… you already took your picture for the application, right?”

“Yeah.”

The one with the long hair.

“Then you’re fine,” said Ononoki.

I couldn’t fathom what basis she had for saying anything was fine… Plus, if I did get into college I’d have to take a photo for my student ID, but whatever, it was a nice thing to say.

A nice promise—she couldn’t keep.

“I think I get the idea, Ononoki…Ms. Kagenui. I understand. I swear, I will never again borrow, use, or exploit the power of a

vampire to face off against an aberration—if I do have to deal with an aberration in the future, I'll face it as a human being, using human ingenuity instead of vampiric power. Does that work for you?"

"Yes indeed, that'll do just fine," replied Ms. Kagenui. "If you can do that for me, I reckon it'll save me a lot of professional trouble. And it'll save your life, and the former Heartunderblade's."

"Kind of a lightly taken vow," Ononoki muttered under her breath, just when Ms. Kagenui and I somehow managed to arrive at an understanding.

What a nasty thing to say.

Something a nasty person would say.

Then again, lightly taken? Maybe so. I wasn't confident that I'd keep that promise if push came to shove.

In the end, no matter what vows I took—if, for instance, Senjogahara or Hanekawa was about to die before my very eyes and I could prevent it by transforming into a vampire, I'm pretty sure there'd be no question. I wouldn't think about the cost of my action, I'd just be lost in it.

That's the kind of guy Koyomi Araragi is.

I still felt that way after everything I'd learned, and regretted, and knowing full well how that pesky character trait of mine invited any number of crises in the past—even death wouldn't cure me of my recklessness, or make me wreck less stuff.

Even not dying wouldn't cure me—alas.

That said, however, my agreement with Ms. Kagenui wasn't just an expedient to escape her threats of violence.

Even if I harbored doubts about myself in my heart of hearts, I don't have the nerves of steel it takes to bullshit such a vicious opponent.

My nerves are probably more like rusty tin.

Which meant that I needed to come up with a way of dealing with aberrations that didn't involve transforming into a vampire—even if we weren't talking about aberrations, I had to figure out how to prevent situations like Senjogahara or Hanekawa's hypothetically imminent demise from cropping up in the first place.

Yes, prevention.

Prevention was the key—consider the situation from every angle, and prevent it. It was my failure to do precisely this that had landed me in the soup, but I could use my failure, my not being reflected in mirrors, as food for thought, a recipe for self-reflection. At least it was me and not someone else whose goose was cooked.

Well.

Ononoki was absolutely right that, compared to Senjogahara's old affliction and Kanbaru's arm—not having a reflection was more like a party trick.

So relax.

I mean, I should be thankful it was a vampire.

What if it had been a gorgon? That would've been terrible.

Then I'd have turned to stone when I looked in the mirror.

"Why force yourself to be so positive…" murmured Ms. Kagenui. "That optimism will just turn to ashes in your mouth. When you wake up tomorrow, I reckon you'll find yourself in hell."

"What a nasty thing to say…the both of you, nothing but nasty things to say. Is that what you call informed consent? And don't worry, my little sisters put on a big show of waking me up every morning, so I won't have time to get depressed about it… Well, Ms. Kagenui, Ononoki. Thanks for all your help."

"And you, thank you kindly—no, wait a sec!" Ms. Kagenui wasn't playful enough to suddenly throw in a joke like that, so she must've just slipped for a second there. "I'm still fixing to examine your body—thoroughly."

“Is that so?”

“Of course. You may still be more human than not, but are you willing to die just because you ate some garlic by accident? I reckon the sun won’t reduce you to ash this time of year, but I can’t be sure about the dog days of summer. Think of the future, if you want to take a holiday to some tropical island in your old age, your nice tan skin might go up in flames.”

“The UV index affects a vampire’s sensitivity to the sun?”

First I’d heard of it.

Global warming was going to wipe out vampires once and for all…

“Figuring out what you can do and what you can’t, what’s okay and what’s not, where the borderline is, and where the foul lines are—that’ll make the rest of your life a whole lot easier. That’s just my advice, though, my work as an expert is done here for the moment.”

“I see…”

It sounded terrible.

That is, I was already fed up just thinking about it—I wasn’t as strong-willed as Senjogahara. To live a life like that, a partner’s… Shinobu’s cooperation would be indispensable.

I needed someone to smack me every time I screwed up.

Seemed like Senjogahara’s experience would be instructive—but when I looked at my partner Shinobu, she had her arms crossed, and if she didn’t seem displeased, she didn’t seem convinced either.

“Um…Shinobu.”

“What.”

Uh oh.

Not trying to hide her feelings.

Zero effort at keeping up appearances.

Then again, it was hard to tell what she was feeling in the first place…though whatever it was, it definitely wasn't good.

"This'll probably be inconvenient for you too, so…sorry."

"'Tis not something to apologize for. I tire of telling thee this, my lord, but we share a common destiny, our lots are cast together□the fact that we are thus united at all is itself a miraculously convenient plot device, and for that alone 'tis meet that some price be paid as thou hast said."

'Tis no impediment nor inconvenience to me, Shinobu maintained, suddenly defiant□but she was absolutely right.

Then what was she so unhappy about? Perhaps for Shinobu Oshino, the formerly immortal king of aberrations, simply getting advice from this expert, her natural enemy the Aberration Roller, was unbearable enough. Even if she hadn't stood on her head.

"And I'm assuming we can't put it off until tomorrow?"

"No. No indeed, with your vampiric level at its highest here under the moonlight, we ought to be able to reckon the limit precisely. Not that I think it likely, but there's an outside chance that if we wait until tomorrow, you'll up and evaporate with the first rays of the sun. And I imagine you wouldn't be too keen on that, now, would you. If we work through the night we should be able to learn most everything we need to know."

"Don't worry, monstieur. I'll be the one to carry out the bulk of the examination… I'll be diligent, and gentlemanly. No sneak-attacks like when Big Sis broke your fingers."

"…"

I hadn't even considered that last possibility, but now that she'd brought it up, I was suddenly a little afraid of a full examination… And did Ononoki being the examiner put my mind at ease? If you turned her words around it sounded like she was announcing that she would break my bones, just not in a sneak attack.

Hang on.

Maybe she was going to perform the service—I mean the examination, by licking my entire body like she sucked on my toe?

I was starting to look forward to it.

“What are you grinning about, monstieur… It’s creepy.”

I don’t know if it was Kaiki’s influence or if she’d have said it anyway, but such a straight rejection was surprisingly hurtful.

I did hate Kaiki after all.

“Well, I’m keen to get started—you don’t need to call home or anything?” asked Ms. Kagenui.

“No, it’s fine. My parents pretty much leave me to my own devices. Plus my hard-to-please, hardly pleasing little sisters are at a pajama party tonight.”

I’d sent them to Kanbaru’s to protect them (Tsukihi in particular) but suddenly had the feeling that I’d done Suruga Kanbaru a huge favor.

Pajama party or no, Kanbaru always sleeps naked. I wanted to believe she wouldn’t do that with my little sisters there…

“Hmm, fine and dandy, then. I’ll just give Gaen-senpai a holler and tell her it was nothing big.”

“…”

Right, nothing big.

Nothing at all.

A perfectly natural attitude for someone like Ms. Kagenui, who was constantly facing off against immortal aberrations, but it was also perfectly true—for me as well.

This was perfectly ordinary.

Compared to the months Nadeko Sengoku had lost.

This was nothing at all.

“Yotsugi. Cell phone.”

“Yes, Sis.”

Ononoki produced a cell phone—a smart phone—from who knows where, and handed it to Ms. Kagenui. Ononoki, a smart phone? I was taken aback. Though from their exchange I gathered that it was Ms. Kagenui’s, and she was just making her familiar carry it.

Since she constantly needed to navigate difficult terrain, Ms. Kagenui probably did her best to travel as lightly as possible… Maybe she gave it all to Ononoki to carry, her wallet, her cell phone, everything.

“Too bad I didn’t get to slaughter you, but having caught you just before you blossomed into an immortal aberration, I’m fully satisfied with my day’s work—hmmhmhmm,” Ms. Kagenui remarked as she typed on her cell phone, humming here and there—she was most likely composing a report for Ms. Gaen, but unlike Shinobu, Ms. Kagenui seemed to be in very high spirits indeed. I trembled in horror at her boundlessly disturbing disappointment at not getting to kill me, but as far as I could tell from her expression, she wasn’t actually that disappointed.

Did catching people before they blossomed into immortal aberrations—having managed to—really make her that happy?

“Hey, Ms. Kagenui.”

“What can I do you for?”

“Um… Let’s see, actually I wanted to ask you this over the summer as well, but…why are you so set on killing immortal aberrations?”

“Sorry?” Her hand stopped typing mid-message.

I asked knowing that I might be stepping into taboo territory, but all she did was ask me to repeat myself. Like she was so wrapped up

in composing her message that she heard me, but not really.

“What was that, young man?”

“I was just… I was just asking why you’re so intent on killing immortal aberrations… As a field of aberration specialization, that’s quite specific, isn’t it?”

“Hm? Maybe it is at that. But I don’t really think of it that way. Seeing as most aberrations, monsters that is, are already dead. Isn’t that right, Yotsugi?”

“Sure…though the standard is pretty ambiguous, monstieur. Depending on how you interpret immortality, you could even say that Big Sis is a general practitioner.”

“…”

Well.

Sure, fair enough.

Since the one saying so, her familiar, was a corpse tsukumogami, an immortal aberration you might expect to be a target for Ms. Kagenui in the first place. Because of that contradiction, or failure even, maybe her area of expertise was surprisingly fuzzy.

Intuitive, so to speak.

And it was Kaiki, of all people, who’d described Ms. Kagenui and Ononoki’s specialty as “narrow”□maybe I’d made a real fool of myself taking what he said at face value.

I was mortified.

“The fact is, I’m not the only expert who specializes in immortal aberrations□though it’s true enough that there’s only one other who’s as keen as I am to kill them, no matter what the cost.”

“So there’s someone else, huh?”

Somehow that didn’t sit well with me.

As someone she'd tried to kill—as an immortal aberration she'd tried to roll, with that ferocious fanaticism—no matter what the cost.

"Keheh, that someone else is a bit of a recluse, though, so don't fret about it, young man—even went astray from Ms. Gaen's group, that one, a real stray dog," said Ms. Kagenui. "No need to take that into account. As to why a body specializes in immortal aberrations, well, it's because no matter how much you smash them or how hard you hit them, you can never go too far—hm? Don't I recall telling you this before?"

"Yeah, I've definitely heard that part before, but…"

But I didn't think that could be the only reason.

Did she really set herself against all immortal aberrations—for that reason alone? It seemed like an all-too-perilous way of life…

She was a street-fighting woman, maybe that was reason enough?

Like she was intentionally selecting the highest difficulty level or something—though other than the bigger of my little sisters, I've only ever encountered that kind of character in boys' manga.

"What, young man? You hankering for the spinoff about how I got started down this path?"

"No no no, I'm not such a nosey parker… It's just, to be honest, I'm bothered by how much it bothers me. Oshino was the first one of you I met, and his area of expertise barely seemed to amount to anything… But ultimately I guess the same is true of you and Kaiki, and Ms. Gaen too."

"What're you on about? You ought to be more worried about Yotsugi's reasons than mine, anyway."

"Huh?"

The thrust of my question suddenly deflected, I turned towards Ononoki—but she was just looking at me, expressionless as always.

Blankly, vacantly.

Looking at no longer fully human me.

“Ms. Kagenui, what do you mean?”

“Hm?”

Apparently her smart phone vibrated as I was about to pursue the matter. She’d gotten a call while she was still in the middle of composing that message to Ms. Gaen.

Ms. Kagenui checked the screen, which I couldn’t see from where I was standing, and scowled—then pressed the button to pick up the call.

“Hello, Kagenui speaking,” she answered like nothing was going on.

Well, it’s not like it was such a race against time at this point, so I wasn’t particularly worried about being interrupted.

What did worry me, though, was Ms. Kagenui’s ebullient mood souring somewhat.

Her expression changed visibly.

“Uh huh… Hang on a minute. Hang on. I was just now telling the young man about… That can’t be. Senpai, that’s just too awful!”

Senpai?

Senpai—there’s only one person in the world Ms. Kagenui calls senpai, so that meant she was talking to Ms. Gaen, Izuko Gaen. In which case her change of expression made sense. Even Ms. Kagenui had trouble with Ms. Gaen’s unique brand of “presumptuousness.”

For my part, my first reaction was that you’d expect no less—to call just as there was a break in our conversation, in fact just as Ms. Kagenui was composing a message to her—you’d expect no less of Ms. Gaen, and yet—

Something, somehow, seemed strange…

“Uh huh… Uh huh. But right now, Tadatsuru… Really? Okay. I’ll

let Araragi know—that's all we can do right now, I reckon. And we're okay as is? Just keep going with the flow?"

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, Ms. Kagenui nodded two or three times, then said, "Goodbye," and hung up. She did know how to say a proper farewell, I thought to myself.

It was, frankly speaking, no time for such frivolous thoughts—but I had a bad habit of comparing Ms. Kagenui and Kaiki, and Ms. Gaen, to Oshino.

"Young man. The worst news has come at the worst time."

"Huh? Th-That call was from Ms. Gaen, though, wasn't it?"

No.

There was no doubt about that—but hang on, Ms. Kagenui hadn't told the other person a thing about the current situation, that is to say about my condition.

In other words, she hadn't delivered any of the report that she'd been preparing, that she'd been composing in written form—which meant, naturally, that the conversation had been about something Ms. Gaen had on her mind.

And that conversation concerned this "worst news"?

In which case, why would this be the "worst time"? To begin with, any time you get the worst news, whenever it is, that moment, that right now automatically becomes the worst time, doesn't it?

"I'll lend you Yotsugi for a spell. Now hurry, there's not a moment to lose."

"Hurry…to where?"

"To Suruga Kanbaru's house. To the house where Gaen-senpai's sister Toé's daughter lives—hurry up and go find your little sisters," Ms. Kagenui said with a sharp glare, her tone sharp—altogether sharply. "Though they may not actually be there anymore."

012

Yotsugi Ononoki's finishing move.

The finishing move of the shikigami employed by expert and violent onmyoji Yozuru Kagenui was known as the "Unlimited Rulebook" (rules consisting mostly of exceptions)—I don't know the origin of that bizarre name, but this no ifs, ands, or buts secret technique involved instantly and explosively enlarging one part of the body to attack the target, an extremely up-close-and-personal melee offense of unlimited power incongruous with Ononoki's outward appearance.

Though even if it didn't seem appropriate for a tween girl, it was appropriate enough for Ms. Kagenui's shikigami… The amazing thing about the move was that it was possible to use it for defense as well as offense. Well, defense might not be the proper term—more like evasive action.

If need be, one could use the reaction, the recoil from instantly and explosively enlarging one's body to travel at high speed in any direction—forward or backward or right or left, even up. If you could stand on the ceiling, I imagine it would be possible to use it to travel straight down as well.

So really you could just call it "movement" instead of "evasive action."

To put it in RPG terms, it was simultaneously both a ranged attack and a movement spell—what I'm getting at, in other words, is that even as the crow flies it was a fair distance to Kanbaru's house from the vacant land, er, wasteland where the ruins of the cram school had formerly stood, but with Ononoki's power, we could make the trip in just a few seconds.

Shinobu, however, grumbled, "At the height of my power, I too

could accomplish such a feat."

Which was an understatement, to say the least. At the height of her power, when she was known as a legendary vampire, Shinobu could circle the globe seven and a half times in a single second. But unfortunately, she was at present not a legendary vampire at the height of her powers, but an eight-year-old girl at the nadir of her powers, so she was forced to sink into my shadow and ride along.

I wrapped my arms tight around Ononoki's waist, squeezed my eyes shut, and seconds later I was standing in front of Kanbaru's night-enshrouded home.

"Shall we, kind monster sir?"

"No…hang on…a sec…please."

Ononoki was definitely a pro; she was ready for action the second we landed, but the pertinent question was whether or not I was up to it. And I wasn't.

It stood to reason. We'd taken an aerial shortcut, blasting off like a rocket, but the motion itself wasn't the problem; I was in no shape to handle the changes in atmospheric pressure and oxygen level.

I was dizzy, and couldn't catch my breath.

Altitude sickness mode, I was surprised I didn't pass out.

Though I guess I should've been glad just to arrive in one piece.

It probably would've been even worse if I wasn't already partially vampirified though if it'd been through Shinobu's power instead of my own like the last time I experienced this kind of movement, the whole thing would've been no big deal.

"…Urk."

Yup.

At the time I hadn't thought I was relying so flagrantly on that power, which is to say I'd suffered from a certain lack of self-

awareness, but now that I'd been told all of a sudden that I could never use it again—I was painfully aware of what I had lost.

Even though it didn't actually mean that I'd lost anything, and in fact, I'd been steadily losing some vital part of my humanity every time I did it.

"You okay, kind monster sir?"

Ononoki hurried over to me, seeming totally unconcerned.

Being a corpse and all, differences in air pressure or the oxygen level naturally had no effect on her.

"Do you need me to give you mouth-to-mouth?"

"Um… I'm in no condition for that kind of joke right now…"

Hmm.

I hate to say it, but if I, Koyomi Araragi, was in no condition for that kind of joke, then I must've been in terrible shape indeed.

But I couldn't huddle there forever—no point in staying hunched over on the ground. Whatever my condition, this was no time for huddling or hunching.

"Shinobu… Sorry, but let me lean on you."

"If it must be so," she replied, appearing from where she lurked in my shadow.

Sinuously.

I started to wonder where she'd been while Ononoki and I were gliding through the sky, since I wasn't casting even the faintest shadow on the ground while we were airborne; as I considered such trivial questions, Shinobu threw my arm around her neck and propped me up.

It was night, so her little girl's body had that much strength, at least.

A little-girl power character and a tween-girl power character.

“Now…Ononoki. I’m sorry but I’ve got another job for you.”

“You’re a real taskmaster. Giving me plenty to do, aren’t you, kind monster sir. Well, we’ve got Big Sis’s approval this time, so I’ll help out any way I can. But won’t it kill you if we jump that high again?”

“No no no, no one’s saying anything about that… Listen, Kanbaru doesn’t live alone, you get me?”

Her place is a bit of a mansion.

A real mansion, in the traditional style.

It’s surrounded by a high wall, and you can tell at a glance that they’re a wealthy family—there’s even a grand gate. You can’t see it from outside, but they’ve also got a stately rock garden with a koi pond and everything. What do you call that kind of garden, karesansui or something?

Whatever, the point is, it’s sprawling.

Sprawlingly sprawling.

Maybe that’s not the appropriate term to use for such a noble home, but sprawling is the only word I can come up with—and the only people who live there are Suruga and her grandparents, just the three of them with all that space.

So what, you say? Well, if we attempted a frontal assault through the front gate and ran into her grandmother or grandfather, it’d definitely count as trespassing—and while marching up to the front door and ringing the doorbell merited some small measure of consideration, it was a tough sell at that hour. Such boorishness would be just as bad as trespassing.

So I hoped to find a shortcut to Kanbaru’s room that avoided both the front door and an affront to her family—and shortcuts were Ononoki’s specialty.

I wasn't envisioning jumping thousands of feet through the air, I figured we could just leap the wall encircling the mansion.

"Well…we didn't end up having time for the test, but how vampiricized do you think you are right now, kind monster sir? You've got a healing factor, though it seems to be incredibly weak, but what about your physical strength—it's nighttime, don't you think if you really put your mind to it, you could jump over this wall?"

"It has nothing to do with whether or not I put my mind to it. There's bound to be an alarm on a place like this. If I blew it and accidentally touched the wall or something, I'd set it off."

"So what if you did… If what Ms. Kagenui, or really Ms. Gaen, said was true, then the inside of this house is already a warzone, or the aftermath of one anyway. It's a totally appropriate time for alarms to be going off."

"…"

No.

Ononoki was talking like she knew what was going on—if what Ms. Gaen said was true—but unless she really, literally had a telepathic connection with Ms. Kagenui, I didn't think she actually had a grasp on what was going on at the Kanbaru residence. So how could she talk so confidently about it?

And yet Ms. Kagenui had been very persistent—Hurry up already, you'll find out when you get there, so…

It didn't seem like she'd said "there's not a moment to lose" just to encourage us to hurry, she meant it literally—she didn't even take the time to explain the situation properly.

I imagine she hadn't accompanied us because, however un-human her violent capabilities, her body couldn't withstand the shortcut. Though the fact that she used Google Maps to show Ononoki the location of Kanbaru's house was a pretty contemporary, that is, an all-too-human form of wisdom.

“Okay. Hold tight, monstieur.”

“Uh huh.”

“And it’s not that kind of joke.”

“Any way you want it.”

“You too, Big Sis Shinobu.”

“I decline to hold tight to the likes of thee,” Shinobu brushed away Ononoki’s offer and sunk into my shadow. My partner’s determination to be hostile to Ononoki was unrelentingly deep-seated.

“Ready for takeoff.”

“Do it.”

“Unlimited Rulebook.”

I felt like she didn’t need to be quite so diligent about announcing the name of the skill, since if she made a little jump like that at full power she’d almost certainly overshoot the mark□but I didn’t even get a chance to finish this train of thought before Ononoki and I had successfully infiltrated the Kanbaru family’s courtyard.

Just like Lupin the Third.

“Just like Lupin the Third,” said Ononoki.

Boy are we in sync, I thought. But when she added, “I mean, it’s like we’re sneaking into some little cutie-pie’s boudoir,” I was instead floored by our low synchronization rate.

How could we have such different images of Lupin the Third?

“Not sure how I feel about the term ‘little cutie-pie’… Plus I don’t think Lupin the Third does that nowadays. Anyway, we’ve got to hurry to Kanbaru’s room. Su casa es mi casa.”

I may have been overstating the case, but I was confident that I

knew Kanbaru's bedroom better than she did.

I was confident that I knew it inside and out.

After all, despite the fact that it was exam-prep season, despite the fact that it was crunch time, I still came to tidy up Kanbaru's room twice a month. Her room was a smorgasbord of mess, like it had a rewind function so that no matter how much cleaning I did it was buried in crap again in short order. I knew where every single thing in that room was.

I'd sent my two little sisters to Kanbaru's place largely because I'd been there just the other day to clean her room. Under normal conditions, I'd never have let my adorable little sisters anywhere near it—not without a lifeguard. They'd drown in garbage.

With my arm still over Ononoki's shoulder, I tiptoed across the grounds—thanks to her unexpected and unwelcome comment, I felt like I actually was sneaking into my junior's boudoir, but anyway, I took off my shoes and stepped into the hallway—the security in these old Japanese manors was far too lax. They ought to do something about it, I thought, conveniently disregarding the fact that I was the one breaking in.

I carefully slid open the screen to Kanbaru's room.

Well, not so carefully, more like to hell with it, but—sure enough!

"…"

There was nothing there worthy of a sure enough.

What an anticlimax.

It was just as Ms. Kagenui said—we'd only gone there to confirm her suspicions, pretty much. Kanbaru's room was like an empty husk, nothing there but two vacant futons lined up side by side.

"It's weird that there aren't three, though," I muttered.

Why only two futons for three people?

What exactly had been going on here?

It's not like I didn't have my suspicions, I had plenty of them and they were massive, but in any case, now was the time for action—even though it seemed deserted, I crept into the room, careful not to make a sound.

And checked the futons.

Feels like a cliché from a detective show, but they were still warm.

They can't have got far may or may not have been the appropriate follow-up, but someone had definitely been lying on these futons until very recently—next I smelled the pillows. The pillow on one of the futons bore the lingering scent of Karen and Tsukihi, while the pillow on the other bore the lingering scent of Kanbaru—all three of them had been there until very recently indeed.

It did comfort me somewhat that the combination had been Kanbaru on one and Karen + Tsukihi on the other—and then I saw it.

As I gazed all around the room, I saw something that hadn't been there the other day when I came to clean.

"…"

A paper crane.

Since Kanbaru's room was in the Japanese style, it had a grand tokonoma alcove—usually heaped with drifts of garbage. But in the spic-and-span alcove, which, if I may be permitted a small toot on my own horn, was only empty because I'd taken the trouble to clear it out, sat a paper crane, like a traditional decoration.

A paper crane is, it goes without saying, a representative form of origami—I bet there's not a single Japanese person who's never folded one, and yet.

And yet—a paper crane?

"What is it, kind monster sir?"

“Look at this.”

Ononoki came up beside me and I pointed at my discovery—maybe I was being overly cautious, but I didn’t want to be too hasty about touching it.

“…”

“You’re probably thinking, It’s nothing but a paper crane, what’s the big deal, but Kanbaru’s not the type of person to decorate her room with something like this. That’s not the type of person she is. I mean, she doesn’t have an inkling about decorating the tokonoma in the first place, she just thinks of it as a convenient place to put stuff. A stack of pervy books would be one thing, but something as refined as this?”

“Yeah, refined,” echoed Ononoki, shaking her head—expressionlessly, which really made her seem like a doll.

The kind with a spring in its neck, that wobbles when you touch it.

I seriously wanted to touch it.

“It certainly is a ve-ry fine example—anyway, go on, monstieur, pick it up.”

“Huh? But…what if it’s some kind of clue?”

“It’s okay, kind monster sir, if it’s what I think it is—me, I’m a shikigami, or a corpse, so if I touched it I’m pretty sure nothing would happen, but you’re still human…”

“All right.”

That still bothered me, but this was no time for a Q&A—with Kanbaru and my sisters missing, nothing had changed. It was a race against time, there wasn’t a moment to lose.

I picked up the paper crane.

Treating it as if it were some kind of explosive device—

A small, perfectly white paper crane.

“Ick!!”

I shrieked—not in surprise, but because it freaked me out.

The second I picked it up—I don’t want there to be any misunderstanding, I’m honestly just putting the facts down on paper here exactly as they occurred—the lone paper crane suddenly became a string of a thousand.

It was like—a string of cranes had been planted in the floor of the alcove, and the single visible one was the bud, so that when I pulled it up I uprooted the whole thing.

A string of paper cranes.

Pretty banal, really, something everybody’s familiar with—mostly as something you make for a friend or family member who’s in the hospital. Coming out of nowhere, appearing suddenly and unexpectedly like that, though, it almost made me piss my pants.

I think it’s one of the elemental fears of humankind—a dense swarm of tiny things wriggling around is creepy, even if they’re inorganic.

Maybe it’s even more basic than that, and we’re just scared of anything innumerable—but anyway, I trembled at their abundance. I didn’t let go of the one I was holding, at least.

“H-Hey, Ononoki—”

“Just as I thought.”

“J-Just as you thought? If this is what you were expecting, why the hell didn’t you warn me—that it was going to turn into a whole string of them!”

“Well, I wondered if you’d be startled.”

“…”

I was doubly infuriated by the thought that I had Kaiki to thank for

this aspect of her personality.

What if my shriek had woken up Kanbaru's grandparents? No, I mean, really.

Under the circumstances, they'd think I was a kidnapper.

There was no way I'd be able to talk my way out of this one.

Still holding the string of cranes out before me like a lantern, I turned to Ononoki.

"Well? What was just as you expected?"

"I know who's behind this. An acquaintance of Big Sis's and mine. This is a message in Lupin the Third terms, it's like a calling card, advance notice of a crime."

"A calling card… Wait, is this a kidnapping then? Yeah, it's been carried out"

Or no?

Maybe the kidnapping itself wasn't the point, maybe there was something else though that didn't provide any consolation, nor alter the fact that Kanbaru, Karen, and Tsukihi were gone.

But a calling card?

"That bastard loves this kind of parlor trick he loves to scare people with malicious little pranks. Unbelievable, what a creep. But at least this time it's blatantly obvious why the message was delivered in the form of a crane."

"It…is?"

"It's a bird," Ononoki explained. "The shape of a bird a phoenix. In other words, this flock of cranes, birds who are said to live for a thousand years, implies your sister Tsukihi."

"Hunh?"

“Come on, monstieur. We’ve succeeded in our reconnaissance mission, our work here is done. Let’s head back to Big Sis—we need her to analyze that string of cranes. If our acquaintance is involved, I’m honestly not sure how involved Big Sis is going to want to get… but I’m pretty sure she’ll help that much, at least.”

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“Tadatsuru Teori□puppeteer,” said Ms. Kagenui.

It didn’t require much effort to discern the unmistakable feelings of antipathy, not to say animosity, Ms. Kagenui felt towards this individual.

She was visibly aggravated.

“Tadatsuru?”

She’d spoken the name when she was talking to Ms. Gaen on the phone earlier, hadn’t she? But at the time, I hadn’t realized it was a person’s name□

In the end, Ononoki and I hadn’t found anything other than the “calling card,” so with it in hand we turned around and headed right back to the vacant land, er, wasteland where the ruins of the cram school had stood.

“Um,” I started to tell Ms. Kagenui about what we’d found□my junior and my two little sisters had disappeared almost as if they’d vanished into thin air, the futons still warm□but she cut me off.

“No need.”

It seemed like she grasped everything her familiar was doing if she put her mind to it, so maybe she just understood what was going on without my needing to explain.

I hadn’t imagined that Ononoki’s every experience might be getting transmitted to Ms. Kagenui…

Did they have an actual telepathic connection, even if it was a one-way street?

That'd be a hell of a thing.

Thinking back, there might've been a few shady moments I'd rather Ms. Kagenui didn't know about, but all I could do was comfort myself with the thought that she couldn't have the full picture. I didn't want to deal with any more stress than I already had to.

Well, even if she'd gotten an indirect grasp of the situation through her familiar's eyes, seeing something in person was different, so I went to hand over the string of cranes I was holding.

Ms. Kagenui just glanced at it, though, and made no move to take it—almost like she'd seen something unclean.

Assuming that thing wasn't me—it was the cranes she loathed.

Then she'd said:

Tadatsuru Teori.

Puppeteer.

"Tadatsuru, you say…" I was studying for my college entrance exams, aspiring to attend a national university—and anyway, math had always been my strongest subject.

Tadatsuru, Yozuru, Yotsugi—sine, cosine, cotangent.

Each of their names was an alternate reading of a trigonometric function. Which naturally made me curious to triangulate some kind of connection between Ms. Kagenui and Ononoki—and that puppeteer…

Seemed like there had to be some kind of common denominator.

But judging from Ms. Kagenui's brusque manner, it felt intrusive to ask…or rather, given the current emergency, I'd rather not take the time to ask if I could get away with it.

All I wanted was to find out where Kanbaru and Karen and Tsukihi were.

That was my overriding priority.

“Hm?”

“I just…”

“Tadatsuru is a puppeteer and, well, an expert—an expert of sorts who specializes in immortal aberrations, just like yours truly. I reckon I already told you that.”

She put extra oomph into the just like yours truly, but I was pretty sure it was not because she wanted to emphasize that fact.

In fact, it sounded like her tone had become more emphatic in spite of herself, because she couldn’t stand it—she just couldn’t say it calmly.

But asking about that felt intrusive too.

I didn’t feel like I could point it out.

It’s not like I wasn’t interested—in what kind of relationship Ms. Kagenui had with this Tadatsuru person, and I might need to know at some point—but given the current vibe, I couldn’t come right out and ask her.

“When you say you already told me that,” I began cautiously.

Although Ms. Kagenui was a violent person, I didn’t think she was the type to make sparks fly for no reason, and maybe I didn’t need to be so cautious. Nevertheless, I couldn’t help but be on my guard. I was terrified that she might fly into a rage.

“You mean that this person—is the stray expert, right? A stray dog, the lone wolf who doesn’t belong to Ms. Gaen’s faction—”

“If you don’t,” said Ononoki.

Interrupting me.

Incidentally, it seemed that the entire time Ononoki had been gone, Ms. Kagenui had been standing on top of a rock (I had a hard time

seeing the distinction between that rock and the ground, but I'm sure there was one). Now she was back on Ononoki's shoulders.

"If you don't belong to Ms. Gaen's faction, then you essentially don't belong, period…since what Ms. Gaen has is less of a faction and more of a network. In other words, Tadatsuru is like an off-line computer."

"Yotsugi. No need to tell him anything irrelevant," Ms. Kagenui reproved her familiar.

I wasn't sure which part of that could possibly be "irrelevant"—but I felt like that piece of intel sufficed to give me a sense of just how exceptional this Tadatsuru Teori was.

Even Mèmè Oshino and Deishu Kaiki, misfits to the end, were part of Ms. Gaen's faction—network. Those two, those two were.

But Tadatsuru.

Wasn't.

In which case, I couldn't even begin to imagine how stray this dog was—and when I forced myself, all I could envision was someone too outsized for words like eccentric or ominous. He loomed large, and I started to get scared.

"So you're saying that an expert who specializes in immortal aberrations—is the one who abducted my sisters and my friend? Then, his goal is…"

This was a kidnapping.

It was easy to get distracted thanks to the involvement of aberrations and experts, but this was a clear case of kidnapping—it certainly wasn't some spiriting-away. Depending on the facts, depending on how they unfolded, we'd need to alert the police post-haste.

No, it was ninety-nine percent clear that we needed to, but on the off chance that we'd be devising another solution ourselves…

“What, Ms. Kagenui? What does Tadatsuru Teori want?”

“I reckon I ought to call Gaen-senpai before I answer a body’s subjectivity can muddy the waters, after all. Subjectivity, or personal feelings. What I can tell you is that our boy Tadatsuru…” Whereupon Ms. Kagenui described Tadatsuru Teori in what actually seemed to me a very detached way. It seemed like a real rarity for a straight shooter like Ms. Kagenui—“has a tendency to let his personal enmities guide his actions, so his professional work is weak. By virtue of which, the present situation isn’t as hopeless as you might imagine, young man. But…”

“But?”

“I want to make it absolutely clear to you that in this situation, as always, you mustn’t fall back on your vampiric power. Let’s get that straight before you find out what’s going on and fly off the handle.”

“…”

So was she anticipating a situation that would make me fly off the handle? While I may not be quick-tempered, I am quick to jump to conclusions, and I was ready to fly off the handle right then and there—but because I was dealing with Ms. Kagenui, a violent onmyoji who was itching to shut me up with one blow from her fist, I somehow managed to retain my composure.

“I understand that,” I managed to respond. “If I keep on transforming into a vampire—not having a reflection will be the least of my worries. I get it already.”

“Do you really, though? I declined to bring it up when we were jawing earlier, but—it isn’t just you. Who can’t transform into a vampire, I mean,” reminded Ms. Kagenui, looking down at my feet.

It was night, and the moonlight wasn’t that bright, so my shadow was hard to see unless you really strained your eyes—but I guess an expert like her could even see Shinobu Oshino where she lurked in my shadow.

Could stare at her.

“The former Heartunderblade mustn’t transform into a vampire, either.”

“…”

“Stands to reason, I reckon. That’s the inevitable logical conclusion, isn’t it? The soul linkage between you and the former Heartunderblade is a geometric progression—so if you don’t transform into a vampire, the former Heartunderblade can’t regain the power what she’s lost. Your companion must henceforth remain an eight-year-old girl in perpetuity.”

It occurred to me that, depending on how you looked at it, that might not be such bad news, but of course it was. Shinobu being stuck as an eight-year-old girl might be an even bigger problem than my own inability to transform into a vampire.

“Yup…” I tried to nod along as if I was already well aware of that, but I’m not sure I pulled it off. It was just as she’d said, of course, I didn’t need to be told that it was the inevitable logical conclusion, and it would’ve been weird if I’d been surprised when Ms. Kagenui pointed it out—but even though I felt like I had a handle on it, however tenuous, “discouraged” doesn’t even begin to cover how I felt, confronted with the naked truth like that.

Discouragement, yeah, that was what I felt more keenly than anything.

It made me realize just how much I’d been counting on Shinobu—unconsciously. I realized just how much I’d been counting on the power and battle prowess that Shinobu—that Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade regained when she drank my blood, even if it was only a fraction of her true strength.

Yes.

Finally, ultimately, I guess what I’d been relying on wasn’t my own strength as a vampire, but Shinobu’s—or more than that, maybe I had just been counting on my partner Shinobu Oshino.

The things I’d taken for granted.

And in so doing lost, and betrayed□

“It’s kind of funny, though, isn’t it?”

“Hmm? What is, young man?”

“Well, over spring break I’d wanted to seal away Shinobu’s power□and yet, suddenly, I was using that power to deal with all sorts of problems.”

I joined Ms. Kagenui in looking down at my shadow. Despite the fact that it was my own shadow, unlike Ms. Kagenui I couldn’t discern anything within it. Though I’m pretty sure Shinobu was in there. And would stay in there.

“How can I put this… The power that I thought I was using only as a last resort, as an underhanded makeshift means of getting me through this or that situation, the temporary power that I thought I was just borrowing□suddenly I was exploiting it as though it were my own, without a second thought… Maybe this divine punishment was only to be expected.”

“Divine punishment?”

It was Ononoki who reacted to my words.

Yotsugi Ononoki.

“I wonder□you’re obviously reaping what you’ve sown, kind monster sir, but I’m not sure that it’s divine punishment.”

“…? What do you mean?”

“Well now,” Ms. Kagenui took over for Ononoki, “I reckon she’s saying the timing is a little too good for it to be divine punishment□and when the timing is too good, assuming it’s not simply a coincidence, more often than not it’s been orchestrated that way.”

It’s the work of people, not gods.

“For your sisters and your friend to be abducted by an acquaintance

of ours on the very day your reflection ceases to be, the day your vampirification exceeds the limits of your humanity, so to speak—now that's just a little too much of a coincidence."

"…"

Well.

It's not like that didn't make sense—it rang a distant bell, in fact.

Hadn't Deishu Kaiki once said something similar to me? Oh yeah, it was the first time Ms. Kagenui and Ononoki came to town. Over the summer, on Obon.

He said something like, "Coincidences are generally a product of malice"—but then again, in that case it was Deishu Kaiki himself who was the malicious source.

I said, "It hasn't been all that uncommon for my bills to come due all at once these days—I mean, lately it's been nothing but, endlessly paying for my own tomfoolery. All the stuff that's been piling up, the stuff I've been putting on the shelf, has come crashing down on me at the same time—"

"Been brought crashing down, more like, wouldn't you say? Like a game of Jenga. At least according to what I hear from Gaen-senpai—and from Yotsugi here."

"…"

By what she heard from Ononoki, did Ms. Kagenui mean that thing with the "Darkness"—or the thing with Mayoi Hachikuji? Now that was the ultimate example of something I put on the shelf.

And the ultimate example of something that came crashing down.

"Can I ask you something, Ms. Kagenui?"

"What is it."

"It's… This might sound strange, but is this Tadatsuru Teori guy the kind of righteous person or whatever whose ideology won't allow

for any indiscretions or iniquities? Who believes that there's a proper form to the world, and that the world ought to be in that proper form—that just as the Earth turns on its axis, so too should the globe inscribe an ellipsis through the cosmos, that kind of thing?"

"Ideology? Ha—"

What a hoot, replied Ms. Kagenui.

Though she wasn't smiling at all, not even a tiny bit.

She wore the most serious expression imaginable.

"He's utterly divorced from such things. And by such things I mean anything like righteousness, or a proper form. Not only that, he's utterly divorced from anything resembling an ideology at all. Enmity doesn't constitute an ideology, does it? Other than our mutual focus on immortal aberrations, he and I have nothing whatsoever in common."

"…"

That almost made it sound like her own violence stemmed from some kind of ideology, but if I brought that up now the argument might go on forever, so I decided to keep things on the subject of Tadatsuru Teori for the time being.

Though all I really wanted to know was Tadatsuru's stance on aberrations—because if he was anything like that "Darkness," that black hole swallowing up all errors—then my friend and my little sisters, or at least two out of the three, were in real trouble. They were in for a rectification of all their indiscretions, all their monkey business.

The thought made my blood boil, and I wanted to pour all that boiling-hot blood down Shinobu's throat, to mobilize all my heightened senses and search for the girls.

If I did, I could have them safe and sound in a few hours at most—I don't know.

The idea was massively appealing, but the immediate presence of Ms. Kagenui and Ononoki, very much not my sworn allies, was a reliable deterrent.

Calm down.

That'd be the wrong move.

That'd be like taking out another loan to repay your current one—then I'd really be in hot water, like I was trying to keep a failing business afloat once all its liquid assets had dried up. Acquiring power came with a price, which lent a certain sense of self-sacrifice to that course of action, and as long as I was the only sacrificial victim, it felt like it was worth a shot—but it wasn't that simple.

I had to keep in mind, I had to be clearly, overtly self-aware.

That if I ceased to exist, if this human being ceased to exist, there were people who would feel a deep sense of loss, if nothing else—I.

Needed to be thoroughly aware of that.

I needed to realize that.

If I became blinded by that spirit of self-sacrifice in the course of this rescue mission because I didn't care what happened to me, I'd be depriving them of the part of themselves that I represented—I'd be tearing off one of their limbs, almost.

If push came to shove, it still might come down to that.

But it wasn't time to make that decision yet.

"Supposing Tadatsuru did have something like an ideology, it would have to be based on—aesthetic curiosity, I reckon. Though I'm a mite hesitant to apply the word 'aesthetic' to that man."

"Hunh?"

Aesthetic curiosity?

Not a phrase I was used to hearing.

Intellectual curiosity, maybe, but□

“He’s possessed of the sense that it’s precisely what God did not create that is beautiful□that the existence of aberrations created by humankind is beautiful. He fancies himself an artist. That’s his failing.”

“…”

Fancies himself an artist.

She□didn’t mean it in a positive way, did she?

“I’m keen to take on immortal aberrations because, as you’ve seen for yourself, I despise them for their wickedness□but from what I’ve heard, Tadatsuru is the exact opposite.”

“The exact opposite…”

“He loves them for their beauty.”

I may not be the most perceptive guy, but even I could tell that the preface, or the obviously unnecessary annotation, from what I’ve heard, was a lie. And Ms. Kagenui didn’t even try to pretend that it wasn’t. But by lying about how close she and Tadatsuru were, she was indicating that she didn’t care to divulge the truth.

“Even if it’s not an ideology, though, he is very particular, so your sisters and your friend are still safe. Safer than they’d be if I was gunning for them, at any rate.”

“Well, that’s not saying a whole…”

I trailed off because it seemed like finishing that sentence might deprive me of any modicum of safety I might have enjoyed until then.

“But if he possesses this sense of the aesthetic worth of aberrations, why does he take them on? I guess it’s not the same as being the Aberration Roller or the Aberration Slayer, but in the end, isn’t he

still exterminating aberrations?”

“His position is more like Oshino’s, I reckon. Rather than exterminating aberrations, he makes his living as an intermediary or…a neutral mediator, I suppose? An art dealer understands the value of art and appreciates its beauty, but buys and sells it with plain old money. It’s like that.”

“…”

An art dealer isn’t an art collector, was that it? Or maybe was it more like the contradiction inherent in an animal lover working at a zoo, where they lock animals in cages?

Actually, I didn’t think that was a contradiction.

People who love to read books become writers—and if you really think about it, that’s a grand contradiction, but the world is founded on such contradictions, it’s positively foundering in them, so contradictions become normalized until finally they aren’t contradictions anymore.

Then again, if you ask me, although on the surface the old chestnut about the unbeatable spear and the unbeatable shield seems like a clear example of a paradox, the underlying assumption is a little bit strange.

The unbeatable spear. The unbeatable shield.

Either one is already a contradiction in terms—because the moment a decidedly not unbeatable human being is wielding something, it stops being unbeatable.

Like how I couldn’t get a handle on Shinobu’s vampiric power—and ended up overindulging.

Like how I betrayed Oshino’s expectations, betrayed his faith in me—and ended up losing my humanity.

It’s based on the assumption of a human being who’d be unbeatable even without those things—and no such person exists. They do not exist.

“Sounds like this expert Tadatsuru is the perfect opponent for me to face as I am now.”

“…”

My potentially masochistic-sounding line apparently didn’t sit well with Ms. Kagenui, who, after a pause, said, “Don’t wallow in it.”

She abandoned her usual Kansai dialect and said this with something closer to the intonation of standard Japanese.

“That’s not power. That’s self-infatuation.”

“Self-infatuation…”

Infatuated with myself.

Even if it wasn’t self-sacrifice…

“Don’t wallow in the tragedy of the situation, you hear? The long and the short of it is that your sisters and your friend were kidnapped by some mysterious fool, nothing more. In regard to that, at least, you are one hundred percent the aggrieved party. If by some one-in-a-million chance you actually invited something like divine punishment, it was for pushing it until you lost your humanity. It has nothing to do with the fact that those three were targeted. Isn’t that so, Yotsugi.”

“Yup, it is.”

For some reason Ms. Kagenui wanted Ononoki to back her up on that point, and the shikigami nodded meaningfully.

It seemed weird to seek approval from your own familiar, and it was also weird that the response seemed so pregnant with meaning.

Then again, their relationship was just kind of weird to the point that it struck me as the real paradox here.

“Well then,” I said, “no choice but to save those three girls who have nothing to do with it…for me, anyway. Whatever else happens. Ms. Kagenui, you…”

Man, it was hard to say.

A terribly brazen request—but I had to ask. For my own sake as well, so I wouldn't get lost in myself and wallow in self-sacrifice or self-infatuation.

"Will you help me? In this, we might say, dramatic rescue?"

"I will, since Gaen-senpai told me to—I'll take the liberty of going along with her wishes. But let's get one thing straight: I can't involve myself directly. My power is exclusively geared for defeating immortal aberrations, so it's no good against a human being."

"…"

"Don't look at me like that, young man. However aggravating Tadatsuru may be, I reckon you're more my enemy than he is. So don't look at me like that—I'll let you keep borrowing Yotsugi—and I'll lend you my wisdom as well. Anyhoo, the first thing we need to do is take a looksee at those cranes. If they are a message, I reckon they're a message for you."

"For me?"

"I can't say for sure how thoroughly he understands the situation, but—Tadatsuru's ultimate target is definitely you."

"Me? No, wait, Tadatsuru's target—"

"You, and the former Heartunderblade. The harmless certification that Oshino requested for you is only good within Gaen-senpai's network, it has no currency with an outsider like Tadatsuru."

Then this really couldn't have come at a worse time—someone gunning for me and Shinobu, just when we'd lost the ability to fight.

Artificially.

Intentionally.

Maliciously□bad timing.

“So if that hypothesis is correct, Kanbaru and my sisters are being held as hostages, to be used against me.”

“That’s about the size of it. And if the real target is the two of you, then I reckon those girls are even more likely to be safe. For now, anyway.”

Somehow that didn’t make me feel one iota better.

That is, all it did was make me more impatient.

I was worried about my sisters, of course, but I also felt super-guilty about Kanbaru□I sent my sisters to her house because I thought it would be a safe zone, since she was related to Ms. Gaen, related to her by blood. But now I’d gotten her mixed up in this. If nothing else, I should at least have explained to her what was going on. Why the hell didn’t I?

True, while Kanbaru may not be an immortal aberration, an aberration had taken up residence in her left arm, so she could conceivably find herself in an expert’s crosshairs… Given the timing of her abduction, however, it seemed much more likely she’d been taken hostage because of me.

“Well, this is no time to stand around jawing. First off, let’s see those cranes. If there’s no message there, I reckon that changes things.” And with that, after refusing to take them from me the entire time, Ms. Kagenui finally accepted Tadatsuru’s cranes.

014

How well do people know their own towns? Like, if you asked people how well they know the town they live in, I imagine that most of them would say—well, I may not know it like the back of my hand, but I've got a pretty good sense of it.

That's how I'd respond, at least.

I live there, after all; at the very least I wouldn't say, I don't know anything, I don't know a thing about it, what in the world does town even mean—I couldn't feign that much ignorance, and the fact is that I do have a pretty good sense of it.

And yet, maybe it depends on how you define "town." One short year ago, I didn't know about that cram school building—I had absolutely no idea it existed until Shinobu brought me there.

Nor did I know about Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

I knew nothing about that ophiolatrous shrine.

That forgotten shrine, bound so deeply to snakes, and to a serpent aberration—and to Nadeko Sengoku, until I visited it with Kanbaru at Oshino's behest.

"I don't know everything, I just know what I know"—class president Tsubasa Hanekawa's catch phrase. Hitagi Senjogahara, approaching this from the standpoint of set theory, says she's just telling it like it is, but if you understand Hanekawa's statement as a kind of reminder, a self-admonition, the implications go beyond "just telling it like it is."

In other words, human beings.

Can be self-aware about the boundaries of what they know—however, they can't always and in every circumstance be

self-aware about the boundaries of what they don't know.

By way of example, I can state with certainty that I don't know French—no question about it. This is an example of "knowing" what I "don't know."

But let's say there's a country somewhere that I don't know about because I'm a lazy student and I'm weak in world history, and a language that's only ever spoken in this country (call it "Araraginospeakese"). Naturally, I wouldn't know that language—but wouldn't even know that I didn't, because I wouldn't even know that it existed.

Even a student as lazy as me has heard people talk about the wisdom of realizing your own ignorance. It's the Socratic Paradox: "I know that I know nothing." But it's virtually impossible to articulate the actuality of this aphorism.

Probatio diabolica, the so-called Devil's Proof. If some stubborn middle schooler pressed Socrates, Do you really know everything that you don't know? he'd have to admit defeat—though of course, I'm pretty sure they didn't have middle schoolers in Ancient Greece.

Now, what was I talking about?

Oh yeah.

About how maybe people don't actually know anything about the things they think they know—because they don't know what they don't know. And about how maybe some chance encounter is what it takes for them to realize what they don't know.

Hanekawa might put it like this: "I don't know anything about what I don't know."

If you know what you don't know, then maybe you can learn about it, but if you don't know what you don't know, then you can't act to remedy the situation—now I've gotten myself all confused, but anyway.

The message contained in the string of cranes that Tadatsuru Teori left in Suruga Kanbaru's alcove indicated that the appointed place

was Kita-Shirahebi Shrine—apparently the message employed some kind of code used between experts, so that no matter how smart you are, you can't figure it out unless you know the keyword.

I'm only going to reveal the bare minimum about how Ms. Kagenui deciphered it, though, out of consideration for everything she did on my behalf.

First she performed the maddening task of unfolding all the cranes one by one—flattening them back out into simple sheets of origami paper, an unproductive activity if there ever was one, never mind that there were a thousand of them.

Given the scale of the endeavor, it seemed like I could've helped, and I even offered to, but she refused me flatly, and rather impolitely at that. Ms. Kagenui seemed to be the kind of person you encounter in school sometimes, you know the type, who hates being helped no matter how banal the task—in fact, Senjogahara used to be exactly that type. And it's easy enough for a person like me to understand not wanting someone to throw off your rhythm, even if it's less efficient.

Though given the circumstances, it made me antsy to watch someone doing something so obviously inefficient—as luck would have it, Ms. Kagenui was at least adroit at it. She briskly unfolded the origami cranes with an almost mesmerizing dexterity. To the point that it actually did seem more efficient for her to do it without my help, after all.

The majority of the one thousand unfolded sheets of origami paper (and there really were a thousand. Exactly one thousand. Usually a string of a thousand cranes is only about half that) were just that, sheets of origami paper.

No, majority isn't the right word; nine hundred ninety-nine of the thousand cranes were plain old origami paper, plain old paper cranes.

But the other crane.

The other sheet of paper.

Had a message written on the back in felt-tip pen—and deciphering this message, which looked to me like nothing more than a hasty scrawl, yielded: Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

“Seems like there’d be no way for an ordinary person to even realize that this message was here… Leaving a code on one paper crane among a thousand, it’s so inefficient it makes my head spin…”

“Now, that there is precisely the warped aesthetic sense I’m talking about—it’s a question of patience. The pursuit of efficiency alone is hollow, and it ain’t no picnic to make one of these, a string of cranes.”

Tadatsuru made these all himself, finished Ms. Kagenui, sounding protective of Tadatsuru Teori for the first time—probably completing the task had relaxed her, or she’d let her guard down a little in the glow of accomplishment she felt for unfolding a thousand paper cranes. She’s human after all, I thought to myself.

“It doesn’t say anything about a time?”

“’Fraid not. Just a place. But I reckon it’s got to be tonight—otherwise the police would be apt to get involved. Three young fillies getting kidnapped is clearly a criminal matter.”

“What would Tadatsuru do then?”

“What, meaning?”

“Um…meaning, in that case, what would Tadatsuru do to my sisters and my friend?”

“Well.”

One short word.

But that one word was more than enough.

“The one thing I can say for sure is that Tadatsuru knows I’m here—knows I’ve come to this town. Because otherwise he wouldn’t have used a code that only other experts would understand, an

inefficient means of communication that you, young man, wouldn't even have known to look for."

"O-Oh yeah. Of course. You're right, of course."

It had taken me a while to get there, but once she said it, it was obvious. If I'd been alone, I would've just picked up the crane and jumped when it became a string of a thousand, and that would've been the end of it.

If Ononoki hadn't been there to tell me it was an "advance notice," I might have let my anger take over and crumpled the whole thing up into a ball.

Folding a thousand paper cranes was hardly worth it for Tadatsuru if the objective was just to startle me.

Interesting.

That meant that just as Ms. Kagenui already knew about Tadatsuru from Ms. Gaen, Tadatsuru somehow knew that Ms. Kagenui was here in town, and probably also that she was accompanied by her constant companion, Ononoki.

In which case.

"Hm? So is this Tadatsuru calling me out knowing full well that you two are my sort-of allies? Knowing who you are, he's antagonizing you? No way. Would anyone really do that?"

"Come now, young man, how dangerous do you think we are?"

Well, incredibly.

More than anyone else in the world.

Was not something I was about to say.

That would've been like sticking out my head so someone could chop it off.

"I've told you a thousand times, I use violence only in the service of

slaying immortal aberrations—never against human beings. Generally speaking."

"Generally speaking? That's a terrifying caveat… But how do you plan to apply that? Oh, wait, is that what you're saying? That even if Tadatsuru antagonizes you, he has absolutely nothing to worry about?"

"I wouldn't say that, monstieur. Since I don't operate under the same constraints as Big Sis," Ononoki interjected as placidly as ever, "I'll fucking blow Tadatsuru to smithereens."

"Watch your language." From atop Ononoki's shoulders, Ms. Kagenui kicked her in the head. Again with the violence. But then, Ononoki's an immortal aberration, so maybe it was okay? "Say, I'll respectfully encourage him to become smithereens."

"Come on, who's ever heard of such a genteel character," muttered Ononoki, before turning to look at me. "Listen, monstieur. It's not like little old me doesn't have some small connection to your sisters. So you can count on my complete cooperation—provided that you under no condition commandeer Big Sis Shinobu's power, of course."

"I intend to abide by that condition, sure…but why go to the trouble of bringing it up again right now?"

Did she have so little faith in me?

Well, I didn't have much faith in myself either, but it was a straight-up shock that a character as ingenuous, as unworldly, by which I mean as gullible as Ononoki, wouldn't have faith in me.

"It's obvious, isn't it? It's because I have no faith in your powers of restraint or self-control… And the truth is, I don't relish the thought of Big Sis and me having to fight you and the former Heartunderblade because you turned into a vampire, a full vampire."

"…"

She threw that in without changing her intonation at all, so it took

me a minute to understand that all she meant was, I don't want to be your enemy.

And while it may have been no more than Ononoki's personal take…it was really heartening that someone would say that to me under those circumstances.

What the hell was wrong with me? I found it so heartening that I wanted to cry.

"Then again, I can only assume Tadatsuru has taken precautions against me. Taken every precaution he can. Originally□"

"No need to finish that sentence, Yotsugi. Sometimes it's easier to keep it on the need-to-know. Anyway, we know where he is, and we know where he's coming from□nothing to do now but act." Ms. Kagenui, having cut off whatever Ononoki was about to say, looked at the watch on her left wrist. The band was a slender chain. I'm relatively conscious of the fact that I wear a watch, so I end up being conscious of other people's watches as well… In any case, apparently it indicated that it was "after one in the morning. We'd best have this settled before daybreak□any way you slice it. In other words, young man, your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to have your two little sisters and your friend, Gaen-senpai's niece, back home and snug in their beds before daybreak."

Hmm.

Summed up like that, it all seemed so simple□and even "better" than its simplicity was the fact that the mission didn't include an obligation to defeat or even fight Tadatsuru Teori□in other words, it was feasible for us to come up with a plan to outwit Tadatsuru and get the hostages back without bloodshed.

Not just feasible, that was the whole idea.

That was what we needed to do.

Since I couldn't currently use my vampiric power□the whole idea was for me to face my travails using only human ingenuity.

To do my part as a human being.

“But once they’re back home and snug in their beds, I can’t just leave them with the traumatic memory of being assaulted in their sleep and getting kidnapped by some stranger.”

“Then make them forget. I reckon five or six blows to the head should do the trick.”

“…”

Jesus, lady.

Well, Tsukihi had no memories of a similar experience she’d had over the summer…but I had to wonder.

Would it go that smoothly this time around?

No, I could worry about that later□first I had to weather tonight’s storm, or there’d be nothing to worry about to begin with.

Given how meticulously our opponent had prepared that code, not to mention all those cranes, that would be no mean feat□but I had to do it. I had to, because I was a person.

Because I was a human being.

“Okay, Ononoki. I’m sorry to ask, but do you think we can take another hop to Kira-Shirahebi Shrine? It’s located…”

It wasn’t going to be so easy to look up that spot up in the mountains on a smart phone, and we needed to be pretty precise in our landing point, so it was going to be tough, but considering how little time we had and how long it would take to get there otherwise, we had no choice but to travel to our appointed meeting under Ononoki’s steam.

With that in mind I started explaining where the shrine was, but Ms. Kagenui cut in. “You might as well stop right there. Tadatsuru sent us this message knowing full well that Yotsugi is here, so approaching from above is out. An aerial assault what comes from the clear blue sky’ll leave you too exposed, it’ll be over before it starts.”

What would be over and why wasn't clear to me—what, were we going to be picked off by anti-aircraft fire? However, she was definitely correct that if we wanted to catch him unawares, arriving at the appointed location from the open sky (the fact that it was night notwithstanding) was not the most advisable strategy.

"Fine, then Ononoki can jump to somewhere near the mountain, and we go on foot the rest of the way…"

Going mountain climbing with Ononoki again?

We had a strange habit of getting lost in the mountains together.

Maybe we should join Wandervogel?

"I'll take the normal route," Ms. Kagenui declared, "and join up with you by and by—but don't delay on my account, start the rescue operation when you see fit. Act on your own judgment. Even once I'm there, I probably won't be able to help out the team anyway."

"…"

No, probably not.

Plus, if we waited for Ms. "can't touch the ground" Kagenui to get there, the sun might come up already.

"Roger. Okay then," I said, putting my arms around Ononoki's waist.

It occurred to me each time I did that it must be kind of an indecent sight.

"By the way, Ononoki. Do you think you might be able to keep to a lower altitude? Just a teensy-weensy bit?"

"Can't do a lower altitude," Ononoki said.

Expressionlessly.

"But I can do a lower velocity. Want me to?"

“No.” With my face buried in her side and my arms wrapped around her in a bear hug, I shook my head. “That’s okay. Blast off!”

015

“Well□what took you so long, Araragi-senpai? My dear Araragi-senpai. I was getting tired of waiting for you.”

As Ononoki and I alit from the sky at the foot of the mountain beneath Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, who should be crouching there by the red light at the intersection of the road and the footpath, bip-booping away on her cell phone (I guess she had never changed the factory settings, so the typing sounds were still enabled), but Ogi Oshino.

Ogi Oshino.

She was a freshman who’d transferred to Naoetsu High at the end of last year.

I had no idea how much she meant it when she said, I was getting tired of waiting for you□I wasn’t even sure what she really meant by it in the first place. But a glance at the screen of her cell phone showed that Ogi wasn’t texting away like your average high school girl. Instead, she seemed to be reading an e-book.

Man, people use their cell phones for literally everything these days.

It was no time to start quibbling about why the nickname for smart phone is sumaho and not sumafo□plus people don’t even say smart phone anymore, lately they call them smart devices or whatever.

But maybe it’s actually a pretty good idea to start making smart-phone screens large enough for e-books□readers care about what kind of tool they use to read “works” that are, ultimately, only data, and when it comes to hardware, familiarity’s more important than portability.

“Ogi, hey…”

I released my grip on Ononoki's waist and, getting her to stay there, trotted over to my junior.

Given the current situation, I didn't have time to stand around shooting the breeze, but I couldn't just breeze right by the "I was getting tired of waiting for you" part.

Especially not when it was Ogi Oshino who said it.

Mèmè Oshino's niece.

"It's dangerous for a high school girl to be out here alone this time of night. Always living on the edge, huh? Come on, I'll get you home."

"Hahaha, the same way you just arrived, Araragi-senpai? In a single bound? I'm all set, thanks. Not that I have a home to go to anyway—forget about that, totally didn't mean it, and you're in a hurry anyway, aren't you, Araragi-senpai? I just wanted to give you some words of encouragement on your way to the front lines and have been waiting here since morning."

"Since morning?"

Morning.

This morning it was still up in the air whether I had a reflection or not—well, she was probably just kidding like always. It was obviously one of Ogi's inflammatory jokes. She loved throwing people off balance with a steady stream of flamboyantly outlandish and bizarre humor.

Even if it wasn't since morning, though—she'd probably been there since around seven in the evening. That was the kind of kid she was.

The kind of niece.

Who put people off balance even without making jokes.

As a firm believer in the Nuance Proposition, I assumed that all nieces were also nice, but I guess she was the exception that proved

the rule.

“Huh? What happened to your little blond loli slave? I never see you without her. Seems odd, according to your character background, you can’t accomplish much of anything without her, Araragi-senpai.”

“I didn’t use to think that was true,” I answered. Honestly. “But yeah, I do now. That’s how our characters were written. And you know what? I’m not ashamed of it—nothing wrong with getting a little help from your friends.”

“But you overdid it, didn’t you? My uncle kept telling you, didn’t he? Let’s see…what was it again? You know, that catch phrase my uncle is always spouting, um…that one, that one, that one, that one.”

There was no way she’d forgotten it.

Nonetheless, Ogi seemed to want to hear it from my lips.

With her train of thought so obvious, so transparent, I actually felt less reluctant to get on board than I would’ve otherwise. Though maybe she was just taking me for a ride.

“People can’t save other people. I can’t save you. You’ll just have to go and get saved on your own, Araragi—something like that, anyway.”

“Oh right, right, that’s the one. How could I forget. I’m so scatterbrained, forgetting my own uncle’s catch phrase.”

“Yeah, your uncle’s catch phrase. Not mine,” I said. “Which is why I feel astonishingly unrepentant about it—I messed up, I was rash, I should have thought things through, I should have been more prudent, I don’t think any of those things. At all. Though I do feel bad about betraying your uncle’s expectations and his faith in me, Ogi, and honestly I don’t know what to say… You know, maybe I did mess up, maybe I was rash, maybe I should have thought things through and been more prudent, but even so—that is, even if I’d known ahead of time, I’m almost positive I would’ve done exactly

the same thing. As Ms. Kagenui said—it's certainly not Oshino's fault for not telling me."

I was intentionally leaving out the most important part.

But I assumed that Ogi already knew everything—she knew my situation, knew the trouble I was in—knew why I didn't regret it. I was pretty sure she did, anyway.

She knew, but was purposely making me go to the trouble of telling her about it—playing with me, you could say.

Outwardly she didn't resemble Oshino, but personality-wise she was the spitting image of that Hawaiian shirt-wearing bastard—though for some reason Hanekawa said they were "nothing alike."

"Absolutely. Even if you'd known, you would've done the same thing, Araragi-senpai—which is the whole point."

"What do you mean, the whole point?"

"I mean the whole point, no more, no less. Which is to say, I'm only here like this, as me, because that aspect of you is so alluring—I think you're the kind of person who's capable, you know, of distorting things."

"Distorting what things?"

"I mean, all kinds of things. All kinds of things that aren't supposed to be. And I hate it when things are distorted—or should I say I love it when they're fair and balanced? I want to put things right, is what I'm trying to say."

"…"

To put things right—to put everything in order.

?

"It makes me feel good to put things right—though it seems like you prefer it when things feel a tiny bit bad, Araragi-senpai."

“I don’t think you’d get on very well with Hanekawa. We hate those most similar to us, or whatever… She believes so strongly, almost pathologically, that everything ‘has to be put right.’ Twice as much as anybody else.”

“How much is twice as much in cat terms?” asked Ogi, then peered past me at Ononoki, who stood waiting like a doll just as I’d told her to. Still looking at the familiar, Ogi continued, “And here you are, getting a little help from your friend even as we speak. A friend or□tween girl? That’s the term you use, right? Asking a teensy little girl like her for help is pitiful.”

“Yeah…maybe you’re right. Maybe it is pitiful. But you just saw for yourself, the girl is no ordinary□”

“I’m well aware. I’ve heard about her before.”

“?”

Had I told her?

I guess I must’ve.

But then why call her a teensy little girl, in that case? Talking with Ogi always made me feel like I was lost in the clouds.

Like the conversation would never end, or like I’d never find a place to land.

Not that finding a place to land meant the conversation would end.

What did she know, and what didn’t she□and how much had I told her?

“So does having a not-ordinary tween girl on your side make you feel like you’ve got an army at your back, Araragi-senpai? Well done, tonight’ll be another easy victory.”

“Easy victory… How dare you. Have you forgotten that until recently I was making the pilgrimage up this very path to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine almost every day, and every single time the tables were turned and I barely survived?”

“Yeah? I guess I must’ve forgotten. I only ever remember the cool things about you, Araragi-senpai.”

Ogi played dumb.

That certainly reminded me of her uncle.

Still, I was worried about her future—about what that kind of attitude would do to her future, about whether she had a future at all.

Like I was about Tsukihi.

“Nope, no good,” I said. “Maybe I do worry too much about other people—like, what am I doing worrying about other people when I can’t even watch out for myself? So see you around, Ogi. At school, I guess.”

“But you won’t come to school anymore, Araragi-senpai.”

Her words stopped me cold.

How can I put this, I felt like I’d been gently but firmly informed that I’d never again return to the familiar halls of Naoetsu High.

But I was reading into it too much, of course, and Ogi continued, “It sucks, why do seniors get to stop coming to school, what kind of a system is that? I wish they’d consider us sad and lonely underclassmen who’re feeling left behind. Though it’s not like you’re banned from attending school, Araragi-senpai, so please come back. Your adorable kohai here is oh so sad and lonely.”

“Yeah…well, sorry for ditching you. But with my grades, I have no choice, I have to shut myself up at home and study.”

Sounding disappointed, Ogi replied, “Do you really though? It’s not just me who’s lonely, you know, Kanbaru-senpai’s lonely too. I wonder what she’s up to right about now.”

“Who knows,” I said, waving to Ogi as I turned away—though to be honest, I did want to walk her home. “See you around.”

“You’ve really grown up, Araragi-senpai. Don’t you think so too?”

“…”

I don’t know if she hadn’t heard my goodbye or if she’d just ignored it, but Ogi kept on talking even after I turned my back.

“You’ve really become an adult these past few months, don’t you think? You’ve become very mature. You don’t get worked up as easily as you used to. A while back, there’s no way you could’ve stayed so calm in this situation, don’t you agree?”

“…”

“I mean look, over spring break, when you thought you’d never become human again, you shut yourself up in the P.E. storage shed and cried. So how come you can keep your cool now? Do you think all the experiences you’ve had this past year helped you grow, that you’ve grown up thanks to everything you’ve had to give up, thanks to the prices you paid? Since you learned the hard way that all your tricks, your games, your workarounds won’t get you anywhere? Boy, what a treat. To get to watch someone grow up right. I much prefer a bildungsroman to a success story. There’s nothing like watching people learn from their mistakes, and grow through their failures.”

“…”

“You failed with Hachikuji and Sengoku, Araragi-senpai, but if that helped you grow, then don’t you feel like it was worth it? Ultimately, no one can protect everything or get everything they want, so when you can’t get the things you want, when you can’t protect the things you love, what’s important is how you process that experience. Or I guess people just have certain expectations of how you’ll behave in that kind of situation. Life never goes as planned, so on the occasions when it doesn’t, what’s important is how you avoid being crushed by that, how you turn it into a springboard□right?”

“Maybe so.”

It may very well be so.

That my accumulated experiences—my accumulated failures—have matured me. That they've turned me into an adult. In that sense, maybe humans do learn more from failure than from success, from a bildungsroman than from a success-roman.

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

But.

"But even so, Ogi. I refuse to believe that failure and misfortune, sacrifice and sadness, are 'good things'—once you start believing that, you're screwed."

"…"

"I'd always rather mature through success. Duh," I said, returning to where Ononoki stood.

I couldn't waste any more time, and while it was undeniably an abrupt cliffhanger on which to end our conversation, well, we'd see each other again soon.

Whatever happened.

I was pretty sure we'd have to see each other again.

And I doubt the conversation was as much of a cliffhanger as it seemed to me. Since Ogi Oshino saw through you, just like her uncle.

016

“You know, I bet that kid is the one pulling the strings, kind monster sir, the mastermind who hired Tadatsuru to do some aberration elimination, the last boss who’s amusing herself by tormenting you,” Ononoki opined calmly as we hiked up the mountain path—though when I say mountain path, in fact when I say path, I’m unfortunately not referring to the familiar stairway up to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

Having given up on a direct descent from the sky to avoid being seen, what was the point of then approaching via the usual, well-known route—via that stairway on which I had once passed Sengoku? Well, Shinobu probably would’ve wanted to go that way even knowing that it might be a trap, but at the moment she was recharging her batteries in my shadow, and anyway, I no longer had the power to back up such a bold and brazen approach.

In order to get the drop on Tadatsuru—to take him by surprise, we kept hidden by taking a path that wasn’t a path.

Compared to the mountain paths I once trod with Ononoki, and Hachikuji, this was nothing to speak of—or so I told myself, but no matter how much I tried to bolster my spirits, a mountain path at night is straight-up dangerous. Dangerous and scary.

I mean, you had to watch out for snakes on this mountain even in the middle of winter.

Speaking of which, I know the shrine’s name is Kita-Shirahebi because Hanekawa told me so, but what’s the mountain itself called, I wonder? Never occurred to me to ask.

Hmm.

Is this realization that I don’t know something the wisdom of

knowing my own ignorance?

“Hm? What did you say, Ononoki?”

“Oh nothing—just a half-baked prediction. Even supposing it were true, what would her motive be? Though I guess she said it herself: she wants to put things right—but what does that even mean? What is right, anyway? I’m an aberration, a shikigami, a corpse, a tsukumogami—that’s probably more than enough to qualify me as wrong. It’s all smoke and mirrors anyway, I’m just finagling my way through life—or death, I guess, using every trick in the book. But even if I’m an extreme example, isn’t the same more or less true of human beings too?”

“…”

“Like, just for instance, kind monster sir—you’ve fought in the past to protect Tsukihi…right? You fought desperately to protect her secret—but I wonder, did you actually pull it off?”

“What are you trying to say? That I fought for no reason?”

“No, not at all—not at all. I’m just wondering if there really is such a thing as a secret in the first place, a secret that nobody knows. Whether it’s really possible for Tsukihi’s parents and sister, her classmates and seniors and juniors, in other words for all the people around her, not to know the truth.”

“Are you saying I risked my life to protect an open secret?”

If so, that would make me the biggest clown of them all—and yet I couldn’t come up with anything to refute Ononoki’s theory, at least not right then.

But yes.

It was definitely absurd to imagine that I was the only one who knew my little sister’s secret—even if no one knew the truth, the whole truth, how could Tsukihi keep such a massive secret from everyone else? It seemed impossible that no one would know.

In fact, it was much more realistic to imagine that everyone

knew—but wasn't saying anything.

"I shouldn't let that discourage me, though—because then I'm not alone, then everybody's out to protect Tsukihi."

That thought gave me a thought.

A pretty shameless thought.

That if everyone found out about my situation—maybe they'd protect me as well.

That was probably aiming a little high.

"Listen, I'm just spit-balling, all I'm saying is that maybe it's possible," qualified Ononoki. "At the end of the day, even though everyone's pretty glum, they do their best to seem glib—just enough to make everything seem right with a world where everything really isn't. Just enough to make it seem like there's some kind of order to the universe, to their lives."

"You make it sound like the world is made of papier-mâché."

"More like the painted backdrop to a play—or maybe just a giant international expo. Same goes for Tadatsuru, I bet."

"…"

"Do you want to hear about him?" asked Ononoki.

Incidentally, our marching order was her in front, trailblazing a path through the trees, and me following behind on the path she created, like a total loser.

Totally reliant on her.

They say snakes bite the second person that comes through, so it's not like I had it easy. But when it came to the requisite power to forge a path up a mountain, I couldn't hold a candle to Ononoki. I had no choice but to follow after her like a loser. How have the mighty fallen. Pitiful, just like Ogi said.

“To be perfectly honest, no, I don’t.”

“Really? Even though he’s abducted three of your dearest people?”

“Yup. For me, the ideal course of events is that we take this Tadatsuru by surprise, snatch the three hostages from under his nose, and come back down the mountain without him ever seeing us or finding out that we were there. Conversely, nothing could make me happier than to get this over with without ever seeing Tadatsuru’s face, hearing him speak, or generally knowing anything about him whatsoever.”

“That would be wonderful. That would definitely be ideal, tonight, in light of our plight. But that’ll just get us through tonight’s plight; it won’t actually resolve anything. What do they call that—a game of fox and mouse, of tanuki and mouse…”

“A game of cat and mouse.”

“Right. That’s the one. A game of cat and mouse…an endless string of fruitless battles. Doesn’t feel like much of a game, honestly. Though I bet a cat would have a lot of fun with an endless string.”

Ononoki unconsciously darted glances in every direction—maybe all this talk of animals made her feel like they were out there somewhere, close by. Not that I’d ever heard anything about foxes or tanuki or even cats on that mountain.

It felt like literally anything could appear out of that darkness, though—who knew it would be so hard to walk at night when you couldn’t see in the dark?

It took all my concentration just to keep from tripping.

And I was covered in cuts… Would little wounds like that heal right away, given my current state?

“So I think you’re going to have to ‘convince’ Tadatsuru like you’ve done in the past—face him, talk it over with him, and make him give it up.”

“You might be right…but talking it over isn’t actually such a mature

solution. Lately I've been thinking that hashing it out is no different from fighting it out, it's just another form of violence. Which is why, to tell the truth, after we recover the hostages I want to shut myself up in my room and let you or Ms. Gaen or Ms. Kagenui take care of the rest."

"That really is the unvarnished truth, isn't it? It makes me happy that you can be so honest with me. Well, it seems like Ms. Gaen is working to protect you, monstieur…this time, anyway. She really seems to have taken a shine to you. Or maybe she feels responsible, in her own way."

"Responsible? For what?"

"Well, I bet she's super-conscious of failing to prevent what happened to Nadeko Sengoku… Ms. Gaen's not the type to regret it, but maybe she's trying to make amends for it. Since the thing with Nadeko Sengoku has been one of the main drivers of your precipitous descent into vampiredom these past few months."

"But that was just a matter of time anyway. Just a question of whether it'd happen sooner or later□even without the whole Sengoku thing, other problems would've cropped up. I would've borrowed Shinobu's power to deal with each of them, gotten complacent about wielding the unbridled fury of my vampiric power, gotten carried away□and lost my humanity. Am I wrong?"

"You're not wrong. Which is why you've got to stop now. Now's the time to give it up. Now that you can see□or, not see, the reflection of your actions, this is your golden opportunity. You said it yourself, monstieur: you probably wouldn't have stopped until these symptoms manifested anyway□but still, I want you to listen to me. I don't want to intrude on your view of life, or death, monstieur, I don't want to trample all over them in muddy shoes, but right now you don't know enough about Tadatsuru. Since whatever happens, I doubt you'll get out of this without exchanging at least a few words with him."

"…"

"Big Sis didn't seem like she wanted me to blab about this to you,

she even stopped me from telling you about it earlier, but fortunately Big Sis isn't here right now."

"Wait, hang on a sec, Ononoki. Since you're a shikigami and she's your master, won't anything you do be transmitted straight to her?"

"It sure will."

"Then we're S.O.L., aren't we?"

"She can't hit me if she isn't here."

Ononoki, bloodied but unbowed.

In this age of telecommunications, where people can stay constantly connected regardless of distance, I was envious of her attitude.

Up to and including her indifference to the fact that Ms. Kagenui would probably just hit her later on.

"Tadatsuru, well, it's definitely true that he specializes in immortal aberrations same as Big Sis, but the nuance of 'immortal aberrations' is slightly different for each of them. Slightly, but clearly. Big Sis specializes in immortal but still-living aberrations□because you can't kill something that isn't alive. Tadatsuru primarily deals with dead aberrations. That's the source of the disconnect between them."

"Living immortality and dead immortality? I think I heard something about that somewhere before. The difference between ghosts and zombies or something…"

"Tadatsuru's love is reserved for life in the form of unliving dolls□originally, anyway. But that alone doesn't pay the bills, so he isn't too hung up on it, he does all kinds of odd jobs."

"Yeah, makes sense…totally makes sense. Otherwise, why would he come after a living immortal aberration like me?"

"I'm an artificial aberration, myself."

"…"

I couldn't immediately muster a response to Ononoki suddenly bringing up the subject of her own origins like that.

"It was Ms. Gaen who drafted the plan, just as you'd expect from Izuko Gaen, but it was Big Sis and Deishu Kaiki, along with Mèmè Oshino and Tadatsuru Teori, who carried out the actual creation—I guess it started as a summer research project for a bunch of college students with too much time on their hands, in the beginning of the beginning."

Though that beginning is too far back to have anything to do with me—noted Ononoki. "An artificial tsukumogami—made from the corpse of someone who lived for a hundred years."

"Hunh? I don't get it. I knew Kaiki was involved in your creation, but doesn't that mean Tadatsuru was part of Ms. Gaen's group too?"

"Back then even Ms. Gaen was just a college student. A regular old college student. She wasn't the leader of that faction or group or whatever yet. Though I don't think she thinks of herself that way even now… People just drift apart over time, even if there's no specific falling out. That's how it goes, right?"

Is that how it goes?

Well, the old me might have readily answered yes, but at this point I didn't want to believe it.

I didn't want people, didn't want groups of people, to drift apart.

But even if I didn't want to admit it, I knew somewhere deep inside—deep down in my core, that it was probably true.

Once I graduated from high school and moved away—the relationships I have would change.

And we'd probably drift apart.

"The reason Big Sis and Tadatsuru have bad blood, the reason they still have something like a feud going, the reason Big Sis maintains her unpraiseworthy attitude—I'm the source of all of it. It's a struggle over ownership of this shikigami, of me."

“…”

“Kaiki was the first to renounce his claim, followed by Mèmè Oshino, but…I’ll skip that part. Different people have different takes on that part of the story. There are three sides to every story, you know. The me at the beginning and the me now aren’t the same aberration anyway.”

“Hmm…that definitely sounds complicated. But basically, you’re saying that Ms. Kagenui and Tadatsuru ended up fighting over you, and Ms. Kagenui won, like in the Judgment of Solomon.”

Though if we’re going to liken it to the Judgment of Solomon, it seems highly likely that Ms. Kagenui would’ve won the tug of war and gotten Ononoki by sheer strength alone. In which case Tadatsuru would have a legitimate gripe.

In any case, a friendship ending over who got to keep a doll reminded me of kids playing house, and it seemed really childish.

“Actually.” Ononoki, however, refuted my admittedly very rude surmise regarding Ms. Kagenui, even though I hadn’t actually said it out loud. “I picked Big Sis.”

“…”

“She tried to push me on Tadatsuru, but in the end she agreed to take me. Ever since then, she and Tadatsuru have been estranged. Not that they were ever the best of friends, but that was the decisive split…not that a stray like Tadatsuru has much in the way of close friends to begin with.”

Just Mèmè Oshino, I guess if anyone added Ononoki. That took me by surprise.

The idea of Oshino being close with someone had never occurred to me. He seemed like the kind of guy who didn’t have friends not that I was anyone to talk.

And yet, Mèmè Oshino.

Seemed like the kind of guy who’d intentionally distance himself

from anyone who got too close—and that I couldn't relate to at all, so maybe I was someone to talk.

He was a natural-born hermit—who sucked at goodbyes.

"What I'm getting at—the reason I brought this up so suddenly, monstieur. Is the worst-case scenario," Ononoki said. "The worst-case scenario, where you end up getting into it with Tadatsuru but are no match for him, and Big Sis isn't there in time, the hostages are in mortal peril, you're in mortal peril—when every other option is off the table, when there's nothing to be done about it, I'm almost positive that if I offered myself in return for your lives, Tadatsuru would accept. That's what I wanted to say."

"…"

"He still desires me. I'm pretty sure that's why Big Sis lent me to you—whoa."

Ononoki never looked back at me during this speech, she just went on and on, up and up, walking towards the summit, but as she was saying that last part I grabbed the hem of her longish frilly skirt and lifted it up.

Whoa.

That's what kind of panties Ononoki wears?

That's going to be a real problem when they make a figurine out of her.

"What do you think you're doing, monstieur."

"People who say stupid things get stupid things done to them—heheh. There's no way I'd ever offer you up just to save my hide. I'll thank you not to sell me so short."

"And I'll thank you not to look under my skirt."

"And Ms. Kagenui," I said, reining in Ononoki by her skirt, "didn't lend you to me with that in mind. Obviously, it's because she knew she could trust you with an undependable guy like me. Don't you

think?”

“The kind of guy who goes around peeking under tween girls’ skirts.”

“Come on, I made a good point, so let’s forget about the peeking under your skirt part.”

“You want me to forget about it? Then let go. If you think I’m as shameless as a doll, you’re very much mistaken.”

I was?

That sucked, it was Ononoki’s shamelessness that I was into… But then, someone who isn’t shameless seeming shameless thanks to her expressionless face might be even more moé…

With these thoughts in mind, I tugged harder on Ononoki’s skirt and pulled her towards me. With her power, she could’ve just planted her feet and dragged me towards her instead, but she didn’t offer any resistance, obligingly walking backwards.

“Ononoki, if we’re going to come up with something resembling a plan of attack, this is it: I’ll be the decoy, and while I draw Tadatsuru’s attention, you take the opportunity to rescue the hostages. After you’ve got them, use ‘Unlimited Rulebook’ to get as far away as you can, doesn’t matter where□leave me behind at the shrine and split, in low gear. Some of the girls may pass out from the abrupt shift in elevation, but at this point we don’t have any other choice. I don’t think any of them will die.”

“And if they die, they die. Got it.”

“No, it wasn’t meant to be a callous remark. If they die, do everything in your power to bring them back to life.”

Well, Karen and Kanbaru had extraordinary cardiopulmonary systems, so I didn’t think it would be any worse for them than it was for me. Which left Tsukihi□and Tsukihi was Tsukihi, so…

“But if it comes to that, what will you do, monstieur? If I leave you there alone…though I guess there’ll be two of you, if we include the

former Heartunderblade. But anyway, I'm your muscle, if I leave you alone at the shrine with Tadatsuru, what'll you do?"

"I'll be fine. I've got my secret technique: The Kowtow."

"You'd be better off keeping that one secret forever."

Ononoki sighed, still facing forward. I would've liked her to turn and face me for the sigh, at least, but even without seeing her face I knew it was expressionless, so it didn't hinder the conversation any.

"A little kowtowing isn't going to work on Tadatsuru. Getting other people to bow down to him is basically his hobby."

"Sounds like a hell of a guy…but even a guy like that has probably never met someone whose hobby is bowing down to other people."

"I'm glad you're so pleased with yourself…" Ononoki shrugged her shoulders. It was weird, she actually seemed more emotive when you couldn't see her face. "If you're thinking that a sincere□a sincerely sincere apology is going to get you off the hook, monstieur, I'll tell you right now that you're being too optimistic. Sure, Big Sis decided to let you off the hook for the time being, even though you're well on your way to becoming an immortal aberration, but that was only ever her own provisional standard. By Tadatsuru's, even if you're not a vampire right now, the fact that you've ever been one is enough to make you a target."

"Right, the harmless certification carries no weight with him, is that it?"

"More like the harmless certification might work against you. Precisely because no one within Ms. Gaen's network will touch you, he might feel like he's got to do it□he's probably chomping at the bit."

"…"

What, like vigilante justice or something?

If so, then I'd really been cast as the villain here.

“Plus, even if your pathetic pleas for mercy convince him not to kill you, never forget that a little girl who used to be a vampire is lurking in your shadow as we speak. On the one in a million, one in a trillion chance that he lets you live, there’s no way he’ll do the same for Big Sis Shinobu. Absolutely no way. There’s another route, though. If you offer up the aberration formerly known as Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade to Tadatsuru, he might spare you and only you.”

“That’s never gonna happen, Ononoki, though I might offer myself up for her sake,” I said.

In fact, the proposal might have made me grab her by her lapels if I hadn’t been prevented from doing so by the fact that my hand was busy holding up her skirt—that, of all things, was out of the question.

“Didn’t think so. I wouldn’t expect you to offer her if you wouldn’t even offer me.” Ononoki seemed to have already known what the answer would be when she suggested it, and backed off readily. “But here’s the thing, monstieur. You’re still talking the same way you always have—you haven’t grown up at all. Retaking the three hostages safely, without offering him Shinobu or me, and saving yourself in the bargain—that’s nuts. It’s like dining and dashing at a fancy restaurant.”

“…”

“Everyone’s got to pay the appropriate price for their actions—right? Like how you paid for your overreliance on the immortal power of a vampire with your very humanity. As long as you don’t learn that lesson, monstieur, you’re going to keep skipping out on the bill until finally you lose everything.”

Weighty words.

Beyond weighty, with the way things were going for me.

“And yet it’s hard to take you seriously,” I said, “when your panties are showing like that.”

“The fact that my panties are showing is one hundred percent your fault, monstieur.”

“Don’t go blaming everything on me.”

“Who else should I blame it on… Though maybe it’d be boring if you became a real adult. Listen, monstieur. If that’s how you feel, then I have an alternate plan.”

“Alternate plan?”

“No way I’m going to let you be a decoy. Actually, if you want to that badly, I won’t stop you, but if we can get close enough without being detected, how ’bout I go in all Unlimited Rulebooks blazing. A surprise attack. If I can take out Tadatsuru, then we can rescue the three hostages at our leisure.”

“Umm…” It did seem like a foolproof plan.

Much like my strategy, it didn’t involve talking with him and left no room for bargaining, but her way everything would be settled in an instant.

Even if Tadatsuru had some countermeasures in place against Ononoki, there was no way they could stand up to a surprise attack.

But…

“What’ll happen to Tadatsuru? Will he get off with just a flesh wound?”

“He’ll die.”

“No shit!”

“No good, huh? But he’s the kind of guy who kidnaps young girls. I feel like getting blown to smithereens is no more than he deserves.”

“No…it’s just no good. It’s no good, and it’s going too far. That would be murder. If we did that then I’d really lose my humanity.”

Lose my humanity, I said to Ononoki recalling as I did what

Oshino once told me.

“A murderer continues to be a human being, though,” the familiar disagreed. “Well, I’m not against your pacifist worldview, and anyway, it’s needed. I’m happy to hear you say that.”

“Hm?”

“I said I’m happy to hear you say that. Listen, monstieur. Do you think you could let go of my skirt already? It’s getting chilly down there, I’m worried I’m going to catch cold.”

“Catch cold? Can that even happen to a tsukumogami, a shikigami like you?”

“No, but I feel like it’s going to. If you want to talk about catching or not catching, though, I’m catching plenty of creepy vibes from you standing there clutching at my skirt for so long, monstieur.”

“Oh.”

Once she said it, I definitely, or finally caught on to how creepy I was being, and I let go of her skirt and stopped to take a breath.

But.

In retrospect, I really shouldn’t have let go of Ononoki’s skirt—I absolutely shouldn’t have.

I shouldn’t have let go no matter what she said.

Because, with Kaiki’s influence so strong.

No, you know—forget about that.

Regardless of Kaiki’s influence, it would’ve been easy to figure out what Ononoki was going to do if I’d only thought about it—but I didn’t, I just let go of Ononoki’s skirt like she asked me to.

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And finally, just a little bit more commentary on Kita-Shirahebi.

As the sole shrine in town, it was supposedly responsible for maintaining the spiritual stability of the whole area—what “spiritual stability” means is completely opaque to a layman like myself, I can’t even begin to guess, but my provisional understanding is that it functioned to keep aberrations and apparitions and so forth from “running amok.”

But Kita-Shirahebi gradually lost its ability to carry out that function—people’s faith diminished with the passage of time, and the shrine became an empty husk. Plunging headlong into ruination, it was essentially abandoned, becoming instead a kind of spiritual air pocket.

When I first visited the shrine—or its ruins, on instructions from Oshino, even the torii gate seemed likely to collapse at any moment.

The phrase I can’t bear to look seemed coined for the place.

Forget about maintaining spiritual stability, already a hangout for aberrations by then, it was throwing the surrounding area into spiritual disarray—and the town itself, a ruined shrine sitting at its core, threatened to fall into spiritual disarray as a result.

And what caused all this? Yes, the arrival of the aberration now residing in my shadow: Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

She came from overseas, so maybe emigration is a better word?

Anyway, the arrival of the king of aberrations, the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded vampire known as the Aberration Slayer, threw the town into chaos—shook things up like a patch of heavy turbulence. And apparently the center of the chaos was the

dysfunctional shrine.

Oshino entrusted me with the duty of sealing up that chaos—and I went there bearing a talisman that was, upon reflection, a total mystery to me, its true nature a little too murky.

I had no real idea how effective the talisman had been, but Oshino assured me that I'd prevented a Great Yokai War—the problem.

The problem came later.

Later, this abandoned shrine was restored—a lowly high school student like yours truly wasn't privy to the kinds of political dealings involved in that process, of course, but in any event, the main hall was rebuilt.

And a new deity was enshrined there.

Originally Shinobu had been scheduled to take up that responsibility, with some implication that she'd be taking responsibility for what she'd wrought, but things didn't go according to plan—which was mostly my fault, I was eventually informed.

And the town was in fact peaceful while the newbie god resided at the shrine—it seems to me. If you define peace as a lack of serious incidents, then sure, it was definitely peaceful. But in the past month, thanks to the meddling of a certain swindler, that god got demoted back to the mortal realm.

All that remained was a nice, new building.

And at last, I arrived at this shrine that was an empty husk once again, this holy ground devoid of a god—after a long and arduous trek up the mountain.

The plan was to approach from the back, but staying on course when you're traversing a mountain forest is no walk in the park, and we chanced upon the summit from a completely different angle.

Specifically, at an angle that was almost perpendicular to the main

hall.

If this were a normal hike, haphazard wouldn't even begin to describe it—it was a disastrous flub that warranted turning around and marching straight back down the mountain. But in fact, arriving at the grounds from that angle had its benefits.

Ononoki and I were afforded a perfect side view of the building—and could get a sense of the situation right off the bat.

I, or at least I as I was then, couldn't see very well in the dark, and my vision was somewhat indistinct in the black of the night. But right up until that moment we'd been walking through a forest where I couldn't even see my own feet, so when we emerged onto the shrine grounds and the sky opened up above us, unobstructed by overhanging trees, the visibility was excellent. Felt excellent.

"Is that…Tadatsuru?"

Tadatsuru Teori? The puppeteer—expert? I asked, peering at Ononoki.

"Yup," she affirmed. "Though his hair was different last time I saw him."

"Hmmm…"

This person.

This Tadatsuru Teori—was seated blasphemously upon the shrine's offertory box. And what's more he was sitting cross-legged. What's even more, he was shamelessly folding little men out of origami, the kind with the separate trousers. It was blasphemous, but it also seemed so bold that a god might lose the urge to mete out divine punishment and just tell him I admire your pluck. It was so naughty, who wouldn't want to let it slide?

Though of course.

Kita-Shirahebi Shrine found itself without a god at the moment, once again.

Tadatsuru folded the origami men.

Adding the trousers, and then slipping them into the offertory box.

One after another.

I had no idea why he was doing that, and even if the gods didn't punish him, the current shrine attendant was probably going to be pissed off.

"Do you think he's using that as a way of marking time? Like, when the offertory box is full, time's up…"

"Bingo. You know, you're pretty sharp, kind monster sir. Yes, you're looking at one of the corollaries to the law of sines: Tadatsuru's Origami Clock."

"Tadatsuru's… I don't remember them assigning that in trigonometry class. Sounds kinda cool, but…"

I wonder if Yozuru had to cosign the patent application? Okay, enough of my tangents.

This was unexpected…or I guess I just hadn't given it any thought, but Tadatsuru Teori turned out to be a fragile-looking young man.

I'd assumed he'd be the same age as Oshino and Ms. Kagenui, or "thirtysomething" as we put it these days, but he certainly seemed younger than that.

His skin was so pale that I wondered if he was ill, and he was dressed in a plainly cut, plainly colored outfit. If Kaiki was dressed for a funeral, Tadatsuru was dressed like the deceased.

"Does he always look like that?"

"No," said Ononoki. "I think he used to dress more fashionably… …, but no one keeps the same hairstyle or has the same taste in clothes forever."

"Hmm, I suppose you're right."

“Especially a natty dresser like Tadatsuru.”

“…”

That burial shroud he was wearing didn’t exactly scream good taste—even if it wasn’t as bad as Kaiki’s funerary suit.

Could that be why Ononoki seemed a little perplexed?

Though speaking of, Oshino showed up for a ceremony there once wearing a Shinto priest’s outfit, so maybe that’s what was going on. It was a shrine, after all. All the same, I could understand if I was the one wearing a burial shroud, but why Tadatsuru?

He continued to fold little origami men.

And to slip them into the offertory box.

One after another.

I whispered, “No saying when that offertory box is going to be full…but we should assume it could be time’s up at any moment. We took too long climbing up here, and it’s already almost dawn. We don’t have time to waste watching and waiting.”

“Almost dawn, huh? But that’s actually a good thing for you, isn’t it, monstieur? They say the darkest hour is before the dawn, so even though ghosts are supposed to appear when the night’s deepest, maybe this is vampire time.”

“Well, there you go.”

“The candle burns brightest just before it goes out.”

“I don’t think I like that metaphor.”

Plus, I didn’t need to be reminded of my little sister’s boyfriend. What kind of a name was “Rosokuzawa” anyway? Candledale? Weird.

“But all I’ve got vampire-wise right now is the lack of a reflection, right? I guess I’ve also got enough of a healing factor that I can cure

my wounds by thinking of Hanekawa's breasts."

"I don't want to count that among the powers of the noble vampire, but…yeah. Ironically, the more your immortal nature waxes, the more squarely you fall within Tadatsuru's field of specialization," Ononoki observed, her tone quite sarcastic.

Well, maybe not her tone, given her usual placidity, but she sounded plenty sarcastic.

What, should I have said something about her breasts instead? Girls were such a pain. Or maybe boys were just stupid.

"Okay, then what field is he bad at?"

"Good question straight-up violence, I guess. Humans who wield mystical powers can be surprisingly weak in the face of regular old power. Come on, monstieur. The darkest hour may be before the dawn, but since we can't see when that Origami Clock is going to strike the hour, we should act now. If we're not going with any of the plans I proposed, I assume we're going with your penny-ante decoy strategy?"

"That's what I had in mind."

Her calling it penny-ante did wonders for my morale, but anyway.

"Okay," she went on, "I'm going to circle around to the spot where we originally intended to come out. Then I search the hall where we assume the three girls are being held, and I grab them and use Unlimited Rulebook to get out as fast as possible sound good?"

"Yeah, sounds good."

"This is basically my first time meeting your sisters and Kanbaru, so if they resist, is it okay for me to shut them up?"

"Of course. Well, as long as you don't mean once and for all," I added just to be on the safe side. "How long do you think it'll take you to march around to the back?"

"Not long, since I'll be on my own. The only reason it took us

forever to get here was because I had you underfoot, monstieur."

"Underfoot…"

"Or should I say underskirt? Literally." If she was going to abuse that adverb, she could've just stuck with underfoot, but whatever. "If the girls aren't inside the hall, though, that changes things—if I have to search the grounds, it'll take time. Be prepared to keep Tadatsuru talking for at least five minutes. If you haven't seen me take off like a rocket by then, if you don't see a reverse shooting star rising from the earth into the heavens, then they weren't in the hall."

"…"

"I'll search the grounds then, but at that point we'll have to assume the hostages aren't here, that they're confined elsewhere…in which case I'll swoop in, sweep you up, and take off."

"Huh, how come? If they're not here, shouldn't we make Tadatsuru tell us where they're being held?"

"No. Because if they're not here, Tadatsuru's unilateral demand for a parley was made under false pretenses—an inexcusable breach of the rules for an expert. Totally unconventional."

"Unconventional…"

"In other words, he will have done us a favor, monstieur. A big favor, enough for us to send him a thank-you note. Because if it's no holds barred, then Ms. Gaen will give us her full cooperation—since, as you know, she makes maintaining order within our professional sphere her top priority. Tadatsuru may not be part of her network, but she'd never allow such barbarism."

"I see. Well, knowing Ms. Gaen, that sounds about right, but…"

"Mm-hmm. Tadatsuru is well aware of all that, so I doubt he'd do anything to offend Ms. Gaen's principles. He wouldn't do anything to invite her wrath."

"But he's already abducted her lovely niece."

“Since Suruga’s last name isn’t Gaen, he probably isn’t even aware of that. He doesn’t even know she’s got a monkey’s arm. And, well, would her estranged niece’s kidnapping even make Ms. Gaen…”

Ononoki didn’t finish her sentence, and didn’t need to. Ms. Gaen had plenty of goodwill to go around, but that goodwill was a little too good, there was something inorganic and desiccated about it.

Not to say she was cold, but somewhere in there, the thermostat was set too low.

She saw goodwill as a commodity.

Maybe I’m the unfeeling one, saying these things after all she’s done for me, but that’s my honest opinion.

“So I guess they must be inside the hall,” I concluded. “Doesn’t seem like there’s anywhere else around here you could safely hide three fresh-faced maidens.”

You could hide them in the dense undergrowth, but they’d be in danger of being bitten by snakes. That didn’t qualify as safe.

“I agree. Okay, commence operations. Monstieur, use your Idle Banter skill to hold Tadatsuru’s attention for a full five minutes if you can.”

Idle Banter skill? What the hell?

Before I could unleash that retort on Ononoki, she disappeared into the trees. Now I could no longer stay hidden□time to make myself known to Tadatsuru so the shikigami could search the hall.

“My lord.”

A voice, from within my shadow.

Shinobu.

“I must warn thee□I value thy life vastly more than I do those of the three abductees, and what’s more, I have no particular stake in thee continuing to live it as a human being.”

“…”

“Nor, my lord, would it be unwelcome to me if thou didst become a vampire. I shall do my utmost to abide by thy will, of course, but if such should become impossible, I shall not hesitate. If thou shouldst fail in thine effort to buy time and thus become imperiled by this Tadatsuru lout, in that instant shall I drink of thy blood. Should I have to pin thee down by force, still will I taste of it. I shall make thee a vampire, I shall make thee immortal, I shall make thee fight, and I shall make thee victorious.”

Though I too will gladly fight, of course, empowered as I will then be, Shinobu footnoted.

“’Tis no concern of mine if thou shouldst lose the last vestiges of thy humanity as a result. No concern at all.”

“…”

I nodded.

Got it.

Coming at that moment, it struck me as an effective threat—or maybe as more of a pep talk. I felt like I had to buy that time with my idle banter no matter what.

Even if I refuse to call it a skill.

I had spent many long hours idly chatting with all kinds of people—and I’d do my best to have an enjoyable chat with the expert in question as well.

Emerging from the underbrush, I said, “You looking for me? Well, here I am!”

Every guy’s got to deliver a line like that at least once in his life.

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“Hey. Or well, hey.”

This was Tadatsuru’s somewhat lackluster greeting as we stood facing each other for the first time. You could hear the lack of enthusiasm in his voice, and he didn’t seem particularly surprised to see me emerge suddenly from the forest. I felt like I’d wasted my big line.

His attitude was so, what’s the word…apathetic that it seemed like even if I’d appeared from the sky clutching Ononoki, or marched right up the stairs and under the torii, his reaction would’ve been the same.

No, it wasn’t just apathy.

It seemed more like the despondence of a sick man.

“You’re…Koyomi Araragi, right?”

“Yeah…I am. I’m Koyomi Araragi,” I replied, sauntering towards him, taking time to consider what would be an ideal distance for conversation.

Obviously it would be hard to talk if we were too far apart, but if I got too close it might put him on his guard. Getting too close could invite an attack. Slightly farther away than what seemed like the appropriate distance would be the actual appropriate distance.

“And…you must be Tadatsuru Teori.”

“Must I? I suppose I must… I don’t know who else I’d be. You the only person, Koyomi Araragi?”

“See for yourself.”

It pained me to lie, but Ononoki was presently engaged in a separate activity, and Shinobu was presently submerged in my shadow, nowhere to be seen, so technically it wasn't a lie.

And, for the time being, at least.

I could still consider myself a person.

"Indeed… So how's Yozuru? I guess climbing a mountain would be a real hassle for someone cursed never to set foot on the ground—even if she ran through the treetops like a ninja, it'd probably take her at least another hour to get here…"

Cursed?

Cursed—never to set foot on the ground?

Huh?

Ms. Kagenui wasn't doing it by choice?

"When you say cursed—"

As I spoke, I got close enough to peek into the offertory box where Tadatsuru sat, legs crossed. Well, you could only see inside it from directly above, but the arms of the origami men were overflowing a tiny bit from within.

Uh oh… What did that mean? We hadn't been able to tell from farther away, but the Origami Clock was just about full up. What a close shave. If I'd chatted with Ogi any longer, the clock would've struck the appointed hour.

Tadatsuru had stopped folding the figures once I'd appeared…but man, the guy was an origami speed demon.

Maybe the thousand cranes had been prepared ahead of time to be left in Kanbaru's room, but as for these paper men, he must've folded them all right here for the clock system to function…and he'd filled the offertory box in only a few hours.

It hadn't seemed like he was folding them that quickly, but…

“What do you mean? Ms. Kagenui is cursed?”

“She carries a curse, and so do I. A children’s game of a curse never to set foot on the ground, for the rest of our lives.”

“You too?”

Well, true.

Sitting on the offertory box meant he wasn’t standing on the ground. And even after I showed up, he didn’t get down to approach me or anything.

Just like Ms. Kagenui.

And yet

“Since we’re at a shrine,” explained Tadatsuru, “it might be easiest to compare it to the prohibition against walking down the center of the path to the hall…I guess. Ah, but calling it a curse might just be my persecution complex talking. I’m sure the person who laid it on us would call it a simple balancing of accounts. Yozuru and I got too big for our britches, and this is the price we had to pay the cost of our actions.”

“Like…”

Like, for instance, how I didn’t have a reflection anymore because I abused my power as an immortal aberration that kind of price? The price…forced out of me for going too far if so.

Then this man.

And Ms. Kagenui… What did they go after that was so out of their league?

No, hang on.

Didn’t I just hear that story? And if that was the cause

“No, this is all wrong,” Tadatsuru said, shaking his head.

As though he'd suddenly noticed something.

"I didn't do this because I wanted to chat with you—I abducted those near and dear to you because you're an aberration, and I wanted to get rid of you."

"Well, fair enough… I didn't come here because I wanted to talk with you either."

Even as I said this, I panicked at the abrupt turn the conversation was taking.

In fact, I'd come for precisely that purpose—to keep Tadatsuru busy while Ononoki located and rescued the three girls.

If I had my druthers, I wanted to hear more about this "curse."

How far along the way was she?

How much time had passed?

Dammit, Ononoki had asked me to buy her five minutes, but I hadn't checked my watch before the conversation—I had no idea how long I'd been talking with Tadatsuru.

Two minutes, maybe?

No, that was too generous—wishful thinking. But had one minute passed, at least? Please say yes.

"Why don't you release the hostages? They've got nothing to do with this."

"Nothing to do with it? Come on, you know that's bullshit. Those precious girls of yours, especially that young lady Tsukihi—no."

I'd hoped to buy a little more time with what seemed like the standard template for these situations, but Tadatsuru nipped that in the bud as well, shaking his head once more.

"No, this isn't right, either."

“…?”

“Listen, Araragi, there’s something I want to ask you. May I? I promise I’m not just trying to buy time—” What was the guy thinking, what did he mean by that? Seriously, what was he thinking—I was the one trying to buy time here.

Ah, okay, maybe he was talking about morning—about buying time until the sun came up? That would make sense. The darkest hour may be before the dawn, but once dawn comes, it’s morning. And once morning came, I’d be a whole lot weaker—no, wait a second.

It was more complicated than that.

How much did Tadatsuru know at that point?

Ms. Kagenui and Ononoki and I had talked about suspiciously good timing, about how contrived coincidences are the product of malice—but how much did Tadatsuru know about the timing of all this to begin with?

Did he know—that I had lost my reflection? Or was he under the mistaken impression—that I’d powered up by letting Shinobu suck my blood? Which was it?

Even if he knew that I’d been talking to Ms. Kagenui, did he have a handle on why?

Ouch, why hadn’t I thought this over more and analyzed it beforehand? If he didn’t know anything about it, I might’ve fought him, bluffing that I was at full power.

Could it still work?

Though my entrance had been too pedestrian to lend itself to that particular change of plans… Maybe I could ad-lib it somehow?

“What is it you want to ask me?” Whatever the case, Tadatsuru broaching a new topic was more than I could’ve hoped for, so I responded as calmly and steadily as possible. “Sorry to say there are some questions I can answer, and some I can’t.”

I tried throwing that tsundere line into the mix, but felt surprisingly embarrassed right away.

Tadatsuru didn't comment on it, though, and with a look of feigned innocence, he asked, "What the hell am I doing here?"

That's what he asked me.

"…?"

Huh? I'm sorry?

I wanted to drag out the conversation as much as possible regardless of what he asked me, like the parents of a kidnapped child in a crime drama who get a phone call from the culprits, but clammed up when this question came at me out of left field□even though that was the one thing I absolutely needed to avoid doing.

What the hell am I doing here?

Tadatsuru didn't say another word.

Didn't say another word to me as I stood there in silence.

I didn't say anything either, so the silence dragged out.

I was going to have to be the one to break it.

"What does that mean? Isn't it obvious what you're doing here? Or no, if we're going to split hairs, I don't actually know what you're doing over there. There are plenty of possibilities, plenty of potential scenarios. So that's not a question I can answer. But how can you not know yourself?"

As I spoke, I started to get heated.

Maybe it was proof that Ononoki was right, that I wasn't as grown up as Ogi thought I was.

Whether that was a good thing or a bad thing, I didn't know□

"You're the one who took the initiative to kidnap my little sisters,

the wild one and the worrisome one, not to mention my friend, and boy is she a handful□and now you're just sitting over there like that. Give up the innocent act, okay? Let them go right now□"

Shut up. Stop talking like that.

Your interlocutor has gone to the trouble of sidetracking the conversation, but all impatient, you're going to force him to get down to business? What the hell happened to your world-renowned Idle Banter skill?

Settle down.

You've already lost enough of your humanity□

That you can't rely on your vampiric power anymore.

"Oh, right. Right, right□I'm the one," said Tadatsuru.

Like he was sick.

"I'm the criminal here."

"…"

"If it's bothering you that I'm sitting, I'm happy to stand up□but listen, Araragi. I'll still be in the dark, whether I'm sitting or standing. Even if I stand up, I won't be able to stand it. Not knowing why I'm here, I mean."

"What…"

What was he saying□was he making fun of me? But I refrained from voicing my uncertainty. Tadatsuru's expression was too serious, he seemed too genuinely worried, for me to say that□for me to get angry about being mocked.

He was troubled.

Like a philosopher.

Like a pessimist.

Or maybe it would be more accurate to say, like he was worn out—it seemed like he hadn't slept in days. It couldn't possibly be from the origami, so what had made him so tired?

So thoroughly exhausted—like a dead man?

"I don't understand. I really don't understand. I don't," he complained.

"What don't you understand? What do you mean by that? You think you can rattle me with all this cryptic muttering? Listen—"

I sounded pissed off, but also started to think this could be pretty great. I crossed my fingers, even. If Tadatsuru, an expert, was this wary of me, it meant he had the wrong idea—he'd misjudged the measly human being called me.

I said, "I don't really know the particulars so maybe I'm speaking out of turn, but the only reason you're here is to exterminate me. Right?"

"Right," he agreed readily. "But I don't understand."

"What don't you?!" my voice finally cracked into a shout.

"Why I would exterminate you."

My confusion just kept mounting—I mean, if anything was obvious, it was that, wasn't it? Ms. Kagenui had explained at length why Tadatsuru would exterminate me—

"I'm an expert, that much at least is certain. An expert who specializes in immortal aberrations—and a stray, an outlaw among outlaws, an expert who cares nothing for certifications of harmlessness, who acts on enmity not ideology, but who possesses a fully developed aesthetic sense, if nothing else. In other words, Araragi, you might say I'm the perfect choice to be cast opposite an exception like yourself."

"…"

"Yes, cast—I can't help but feel like someone else has cast me in this

little drama. I'm simply the perfect choice to be here, now, to fight you, so I can't help but feel like I've been selected for the role. Like I'm here to meet the exigencies of the situation. No, not just me, Yozuru, and Yotsugi□"

His muttering seemed directed at himself, and I couldn't catch his mood. Talk about incomprehension.

Someone tell me what the hell this guy's going on about.

No.

If I forced myself to think about it, it wasn't such a mystery.

That is, when I looked at it in the light of my own sense of unease□wasn't he describing exactly what I'd been feeling about this?

The timing.

The timing was too perfect, which meant it couldn't be worse□wasn't that how I'd been thinking about this suspiciously neat, made-to-order sequence of events?

The terrible timing of an expert who specializes in immortal aberrations kidnapping my little sisters on the very day that I lose my reflection□that twist of fate was a little too perfect to be ascribed to coincidence.

Coincidences are generally a product of malice, and I'd taken the source to be Tadatsuru, Tadatsuru Teori himself. I'd vaguely assumed so□and yet.

If he was experiencing the same sense of unease, then where was the malice coming from?

Whose malice was it?

"Tadatsuru. You're an expert□whatever else you may be, you're an expert, not a hunter. In other words, you did this because a client hired you, right?"

I said this recalling Ononoki's theory that Ogi was the mastermind who'd hired Tadatsuru. Well, it made sense. I was there because Tadatsuru had summoned me, but he was there because someone, whoever, had hired him.

"A client. Yes, there's a client involved, of course there is. But the reason for hiring me seemed like a put-up job as well—in fact, it's as if things have been arranged just so, in just the right way. The client could very well have been an actor meant to produce the right plot developments, to create precisely this scene."

"…"

"They say the gods don't gamble, but I feel like someone's been tossing me around the craps table—using my idiosyncrasies, my proclivities, as the raw materials for something. Don't you feel it too, Araragi? Aren't you standing there because you had no other choice, because you were compelled, even?"

That's how I feel, at any rate, confessed Tadatsuru.

Gloomily.

Gloominess fit this slender man like a glove.

But his speech didn't suit the occasion, and he failed to convince me. Obviously, I mean cut the crap.

"No other choice? What the hell, you trying to tell me you abducted people who're dear to me because you had no other choice?!"

"Even this. Aren't you angry right now because you're supposed to be? Anger, to go along with the part you've been assigned—how are we any different? We're both just doing what we're meant to be doing. In the places we've been put, in the roles we've been assigned. No ad-libbing allowed."

"What're you talking about… Is this some all the world's a stage crap? Keep your clever Shakespeare—"

"The world isn't a stage. But that doesn't mean that people don't love a good story. Yes…people crave drama, don't they? Almost like

their bodies crave nutrition. But this drama seems too perfect, too labored—it's hard for me to get into the spirit of the thing. Feels like the fix is in. There's nothing worse than contrived drama."

"What are you trying to say? I don't get it, I really don't—I mean, what is it you want from me?"

"What do I want from you?"

"You've taken hostages. So you must have a demand. Do you want me to meekly submit to my own destruction? Are you saying you'll let them go then?"

It was my job to buy time, so up to that point I'd avoided bringing up the subject of the hostages' wellbeing—avoided confirming that they were safe, but I'd reached the end of that particular rope. I couldn't wait any longer.

The thought that this baffling guy held their lives in his hands was enough to make every hair on my body stand on end.

"Sorry to say I'm not such a coward… If I were the kind of person who would use those girls as a threat rather than a bargaining chip, if I were that aesthetically bankrupt, I'm sure I wouldn't have been cast in this role."

Since Gaen-senpai wouldn't let that slide, he finished.

Gaen-senpai… He called her "senpai."

Despite the fact that he was a stray, not part of her network—of course, the term's sense was arbitrary. Maybe he'd just meant it ironically. But wasn't "senpai" a word people basically used to express some kind of devotion?

"Araragi. Find Oshino," Tadatsuru said.

Out of the blue, without preamble.

"If we can get him involved—I'm certain he can bring some balance to this tale. Not as part of the cast, not as anybody's pawn, but as a neutral party. He's the only one who can do it. Seems like Kaiki did

manage to derail things, and thanks to him this shrine is empty again, but he's too much of a contrarian. He's all too proper about being improper—he's so contrarian that he's straightforward. Which is why it's got to be Oshino."

"We've already looked everywhere for Oshino."

I still couldn't get a read on Tadatsuru's intentions—but I wasn't lying. Back when everything was going down with Sengoku, we searched high and low for that Aloha-shirted bastard. Hanekawa even took the search global.

But we didn't come up with even a single clue.

He'd dropped off the face of the earth, like maybe he was dead or something.

"No, we would've had a better chance of finding a clue if he actually were dead… I see, Tadatsuru. Seems like you're friends with Oshino. That's what I heard, anyway. So, by any chance, do you know where he is?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't be here—I wouldn't have had to do this. I wouldn't have had to…"

Do what's right and proper.

Or be right and proper.

With those words, Tadatsuru Teori's motionless hands began to move again, folding little origami men. His dexterity was astounding. While I was considering how to respond, he also finished making the pants for the first one.

And slipped the assembled piece into the offertory box.

It—didn't go all the way in.

It stuck partway out of the box.

The Origami Clock was full to the brim.

“Well, shall we get started? Though really, we’re finishing up.”

Tadatsuru Teori stood.

Astride the offertory box—sitting cross-legged on it had seemed pretty disrespectful, but now as he unfurled his rangy frame to its full height, it didn’t even seem that way anymore. It wasn’t disrespectful or blasphemous, it was simply—a person standing on top of an offertory box.

He didn’t seem like anything.

But a regular human being.

“Phew…”

Tadatsuru had a piece of origami ready in each hand.

Already folded, each in the shape of a shuriken—were those his weapons?

Well, aren’t we refined.

Guess I blew it, I thought to myself.

I felt like we’d had a pretty wide-ranging conversation—definitely wouldn’t have been surprised if five minutes had passed, but I hadn’t seen Ononoki blast off through the roof of the shrine. There was no way I could have missed it—and since the hall wasn’t particularly large, were the girls not inside after all?

Whatever the case, I’d bought all the time I could.

It was time to get started.

I wasn’t sure what to do—should I at least lead him on a merry chase around the grounds?

Even if I was done for, I hoped Shinobu could get away, but she herself had nixed that idea…

“Tadatsuru. Wait. Listen to—”

“Can’t wait any longer. I’m fed up.”

My vain protestations had no effect on Tadatsuru, who spread his arms wide as he spoke. Spread his arms? What was he doing, why would he leave himself so thoroughly open to attack?

Was he luring me in?

If he was, then sadly I lacked the means to take him up on it…

“I’m fed up with being positioned like a chess piece, moved like a chess piece, and used as a chess piece. I don’t want to help turn you into a vampire,” he went on, an agonized look on his face.

Those words weren’t directed at me what was directed at me was the advice he’d given me before, which he dispensed again now.

“Araragi. Find Oshino. If you don’t, then you’ll just have to be proper. And gain only to lose.”

“Tadatsuru, if you’re trying to tell me something, could you come out and say it? I’m dumb as a brick, beat around the bush like that and I’ll never get it. If there’s something you want to ask of me”

If that was the real reason.

That you took those hostages then go ahead.

“Just ask it.”

“I don’t want anything from you. You’re a human being.”

“…”

“But I do have a favor to ask of you,” Tadatsuru said, smiling. Faintly ever so faintly.

A masochistic smile that didn’t suit his slender frame, that hardly went with it.

“I’m begging you, have mercy on me and show no mercy,” he said quietly.

Ever so calmly, spreading his arms wide.

Leaving his back completely undefended.

“And while I’m at it, I’ve got another favor to ask. A once-in-a-lifetime request, so please, hear me out. Seems like you’ve stopped saying it, I guess you started to feel embarrassed or something, but I want to hear that line one more time before the end. I always liked how you, usually so expressionless, tried to be expressive with that line…”

“Understood.”

The voice came from behind the offertory box.

From within the shrine hall.

“Unlimited Rulebook□he said with a dashing look.”

She showed no mercy□which was itself a mercy.

I doubt he even had time to feel any pain.

Yotsugi Ononoki’s pointer finger, massively enlarged, smashed through the doors of the shrine and pierced Tadatsuru Teori’s body.

No.

Blew it to smithereens.

His slender form, like a withered branch, funeral shroud and all□evaporated despite the absence of great heat, like a vampire exposed to direct sunlight.

Not even a drop of blood was spilt.

A human being vaporized by a blunt-force trauma□a most bizarre paranormal phenomenon, aberrational, no doubt.

The sight of Ononoki, lingering expressionlessly in the hall.

Her pointer finger still extended, drove that point home.

A proper application of the shikigami's secret technique.

"Oh…uh."

What happened?

I was perplexed at how Tadatsuru Teori's body had vanished, almost as if the whole thing was a conjuring trick, but I knew perfectly well what had transpired; it was clear to me, I simply didn't want to understand.

Ononoki ruthlessly said it anyway.

"I killed him."

"…"

"I hit him with maximum force, at point-blank range you don't need to worry, monstieur, it was my act and mine alone. Even if you'd told me not to, I would've disobeyed you."

"Wh"

Why did you kill him? was what I wanted to ask, but my mind went blank and I couldn't no, that wasn't it, the reason was clear.

It was to protect me.

It was to protect the hostages.

I had no right to be outraged

"Wrong, kind monster sir. I'm sure there was a way to protect you, and to rescue them, without killing him. But I killed him anyway," said Ononoki. Expressionlessly. "Because I'm a monster."

"Ononoki…"

"Don't end up this way, monstieur. If you ever live up to that

nickname□you’re done as a human.”

019

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

The next morning, I woke up to my two little sisters Karen and Tsukihi kicking my ass out of bed—nah, I'd put them back into their futon at Kanbaru's house where they belonged.

And of course I put Kanbaru into the other one. The other one, I made very sure of that.

No matter how thoroughly we searched the shrine afterwards, we couldn't find the trio—it didn't seem like Ononoki had planned to do what she ended up doing. She'd searched for the three girls, just as she'd said she would, just as we'd planned, just as we'd arranged.

But they weren't there.

Karen Araragi, Tsukihi Araragi, and Suruga Kanbaru weren't being held captive in the shrine hall, contrary to our expectations—but neither were they secreted in a thicket somewhere in the forest. As I'd predicted, no one with any decency would confine three girls to those dangerous, snake-infested mountain woods.

Though no one with any decency would have kidnapped them in the first place—let alone hidden them in the offertory box.

Yes, the three had been folded up and stuffed into the offertory box—no wonder the paper men were already spilling out of it. The Origami Clock had been padded from the start.

Much like the time I'd been folded up by Ms. Kagenui, the girls had been carefully folded up into the offertory box—and put to sleep.

Put to sleep.

In other words they were unconscious, but even the heaviest sleeper

in the world would wake up if they were snatched out of bed, transported there, and folded up, so something special must have been done to sedate them—to my relief.

Because that meant the girls had been able to finish out the night happily dreaming away, none the wiser. Whatever had been done to them, I didn't think they'd be able to take the change in pressure if we flew home on Ononoki Air, so we took the stairs. I carried Tsukihi on my back, while Ononoki took Karen and Kanbaru.

Ms. Kagenui joined up with us partway down—though she was standing on a tree branch, so "joined" might not be the right word.

She really was running through the treetops…

I had to admit it seemed fun, but it did change my view somewhat to know that she was doing it because she was cursed and not because she wanted to. Ms. Kagenui, however, seemed unaware that I'd found out and just asked Ononoki bluntly, "Did you do it?"

Ononoki's response was equally curt: "Uh huh." And that was all.

She'd done it.

That was all—and in fact, that was all that had happened.

After shamelessly lying that she couldn't "do any heavy lifting," Ms. Kagenui headed on up to the summit—there was neither hide nor hair left of Tadatsuru, but as the shikigami's master, there must've been some mopping up left to do.

Surely she wasn't running away because she didn't want to carry someone on her back.

Afterwards, I parted ways with Ononoki in front of the Araragi residence—the sun had risen, but its dazzling morning rays hadn't vaporized me.

"Well, that's a relief, isn't it, kind monster sir. Looks like your body can still withstand the light of day. I guess you belong where the sun shines, for the time being."

That was all Ononoki said before she set off on foot toward the mountain. To return to her master, I imagine. It was probably out of consideration for me that she didn't use Unlimited Rulebook to fly there.

I missed my chance to express my gratitude to Ononoki—she'd saved my life, and I should've at least thanked her.

But I hadn't been able to say anything.

I couldn't thank a killer.

And I couldn't rebuke a savior.

I obviously didn't feel like I could, but if I'd been able to rebuke her for killing Tadatsuru—I probably would've felt a lot better.

Still, how could I?

There was no way.

Having allowed Shinobu into my shadow—as a person, where would I get off criticizing Ononoki?

Being a monster, she'd killed someone.

That was all.

Somehow, though—I felt like I wouldn't see Ononoki again. I asked myself what kind of tale this had been, this tale where Tadatsuru had been cast in a "role," and the answer seemed to be that it had been a didactic one, told to make me see an adorable pet doll called Yotsugi Ononoki as a murderous monster.

And because, even if I understood this intellectually, I couldn't overcome my instinctive revulsion, it was a tale that changed my view of her irreparably.

Somehow or other, through this and that.

Whatever finagling and tricks may have been involved.

Yotsugi Ononoki and I had ended up as okay friends, and opening up a rift between us must have been the very goal of that "Darkness."

Mayoi Hachikuji.

Nadeko Sengoku.

And now Yotsugi Ononoki—I'd become estranged from all of them.

Tadatsuru hadn't resisted sacrificing himself—in fact he'd thrown himself, resignedly, on the funeral pyre.

That's what happened.

And so.

"Here you go. Your Valentine's Day chocolate."

After I finished my morning studies, I went to Tamikura Apartments to have Senjogahara help me with my exam prep, but the moment I arrived she shoved a chocolate into my mouth.

"How is it? Do you like? Is it good? C'mon, Koyokoyo, is it good?" beamed Senjogahara.

Seeing her smile, it sank in that today was Valentine's Day. I'd remembered yesterday, but realized as I chewed that with everything happening since then, I'd completely forgotten.

"Uh huh, it's good."

"Heehee. Yessss!" she exclaimed, pumping her fist.

A year ago she wouldn't have pumped her fist even if you put a gun to her head. What a difference.

But I guess I had changed too. Until a year ago I'd hated special occasions like Valentine's or Mother's Day, or at least they'd been tough for me—this was no longer true, and insofar as human beings are social animals, such a change might be termed, well, growing up.

What I needed to share with Senjogahara that day, however, wasn't that sort of change, but the other thing, which you'd be hard pressed to call growing up.

"Come on in, Koyokoyo, there's more where that came from."

"More, huh…"

I started wondering what Shinobu, obsessed as she was with Golden Chocolate donuts, thought about actual chocolates, but I remembered what I needed to tell Senjogahara, and it dragged me back down to earth. I hated to ruin her effervescent mood.

It'd be better to bring it up before we started studying, so when she brought me some tea, I said, "Listen, Senjogahara."

"Mm-hmm."

She listened to everything I had to say—the only thing I had told her thus far was that I didn't have a reflection, so she was hearing the rest of it for the first time—and then she nodded.

Her high spirits indeed departed, but she didn't receive the news as pessimistically as I'd feared. "So, what's the problem with not having a reflection for the rest of your life?" she asked.

"I don't know, I mean… Won't it be really conspicuous? What if people notice?"

"If that's as far as it goes, it doesn't seem so bad. As long as you're reflected in my eyes, who cares about mirrors?"

"…"

I wasn't sure if that was a good line, but at least she was trying to be kind and comforting.

"Though…you are going to have to think about the future, that's for sure. If it really is irreversible, I mean. I assume you've already talked to Hanekawa about it?"

"I wouldn't do that before I talked to you. And actually, I wouldn't

know what to say… I don't want her to think I'm a fool… Plus, I don't know what's going to happen to me from here on out. Right now I'm just down one reflection, but there isn't any guarantee it'll stay that way. Even if I don't let Shinobu drink my blood, something else might upset the equilibrium."

"Was their expert diagnosis dubious? Do you want to get a second opinion?"

"No, it's how I go about my life that's dubious. I'll go through with the entrance exams, of course… But never knowing how long I'll be able to maintain a normal life and the good old days is all that I'm sure of."

"Good old days," Senjogahara repeated back to me. "Listen, Araragi. About Kaiki."

"Hunh?" Hearing the name out of nowhere made me jump. If nothing else, it was the first time she ever brought him up to me of her own accord.

"Kaiki was the kind of guy who'd say stuff like that to sound cool. He tended to dismiss things like stability or a quiet life□he never expected life or relationships to stay as they were. Maybe he just hated feeling like he was settling down. And I was stupid enough to think that his attitude was cool□but if that's cool, then I'm glad you're uncool."

"…"

"Don't you think Hanekawa would say the same now? She hasn't been telling you to behave and act proper as much as she used to. She, too□"

This was some point my girlfriend wanted to make badly enough that she was bringing up Hanekawa and even Kaiki, but I'm not sure I understood her.

However.

It got across to me that Senjogahara was trying to get something across to me. That much at least.

I understood.

“Speaking of Hanekawa,” I said, “what do you think she’s up to today?”

“I dunno… Still on the hunt for Mister Oshino, I bet. It seems like there are certain circumstances only she grasps.”

“Find Oshino… That’s what Tadatsuru said, maybe it’d be best to talk to Hanekawa about that as well.”

There were certain things that only she knew, no doubt.

No mistake about that.

So whatever else was going on, I had to talk with her—however angry with me she might be when I did.

“So I think I’d better talk to her right away, maybe I’ll even see her on my way home today.”

“Sure. Then I have a favor to ask,” Senjogahara said. “Do it tomorrow. Please.”

She asked this with a smile, but I don’t know, her tone was unexpectedly forceful and compelling, which got across to me too, so I did as she requested and went straight home after we were done studying.

The shoes in the entryway suggested that Karen and Tsukihi were already home from school. They must’ve gone straight there from Kanbaru’s, and well, I’d yet to speak to my sisters since yesterday. So even though their faces were the last thing I wanted to see right after I got home, I thought I’d better check on them—there was a slim chance they might remember last night’s events in some kind of middle ground between dream and reality.

“Hey, Karen-chan, Tsukihi-chan.”

Calling out both their names like that for the first time in ages, I threw open the door to their room without so much as knocking—and froze.

They were most definitely home.

But behind the pair (who were in the middle of changing out of their uniforms) and propped up on their bunk bed, sat a doll.

An expressionless doll in a frilly skirt.

By which I mean Ononoki.

“Gwa!”

Pratfalling halfway ass over tit, I pushed my way past my shrieking sisters and dashed to where Ononoki was sitting.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Your sisters won me from the UFO Catcher.” I’d asked my question in a hushed voice, and she responded the same way. “Tsukihi is way better at it than you, kind monster sir. It only took her three coins to win me.”

“Who cares, that’s not the point…”

“The point of this whole thing was to create a rift between you and me, monstieur…so it’s Ms. Gaen and Big Sis’s judgment that we should defy that plan. They said that until this town is stabilized, I should stick even closer to you than before.”

So I’m going to be imposing on your hospitality for a while, Ononoki declared calmly□she calmly, placidly, expressionlessly informed me that she’d be staying in my sisters’ room from now on.

“W-Wait a second, you can’t be serious!”

“What do you think you’re doing, big brother? Quit talking to the doll that I won with my skill and my money.”

“Yeah, big brother. For crying out loud, when are you gonna grow up?”

“…”

I shook Ononoki’s shoulder as my little sisters showered me with abuse, but she was already back to putting on her doll act.

True, it wasn’t exactly an act.

I swear I heard a voice from my shadow say, Thou hast to be kidding me□and so.

My, my…

I guess the crazy days weren’t quite over yet.

Afterword

They say that “he who laughs last, laughs best,” but to me that just seems to mean “never laugh, because you won’t be last.” And they say that “fortune favors a home filled with laughter,” but the road home can be paved with misfortune for those who laugh before they get there. They also say, “demons laugh when we plan for the future,” but those demons aren’t necessarily the ones laughing last, and they themselves are often laughed at for their own lack of foresight. “He who laughs at a penny will someday cry over one”? Seems like that just amounts to “he who laughs first cries in the end.” What the hell is my point, you ask? It’s that whether we’re talking about an individual life or the entire world, ultimately we don’t know how things are going to shake out. Stability, unending peace and quiet, unending hell, these things are all pretty untenable, as it turns out. Then again, there’s no guarantee that the duration of “unending” won’t be longer than a human life. We don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow, and we don’t know what’s not going to happen tomorrow. Yesterday’s pleasure causes today’s hell, and today’s hell produces tomorrow’s heaven. That just keeps on happening, doesn’t it? When is last, anyway? “All’s well that ends well,” that’s like saying the result is all that matters. The proverb is hardly funny.

And so here we are, the fourteenth volume in the Monogatari series. This particular tale starred the expressionless and unlaughing Miss Yotsugi. Fourteen volumes. Feels kind of excessive, but in the beginning, of course, I hadn’t planned for the series to run so long. That is, I hadn’t even planned for it to be a series at all. It really snuck up on me! Well, you might wonder, How could he not realize what was happening, but I honestly didn’t. I still feel like everything’s exactly the same as it was when I wrote the first short story, Hitagi Crab, but that’s ridiculous of course. Generally speaking, consistency and a lack of change are two different things, and I’d like to learn to recognize the difference. I want writing a

fourteenth installment to offer its own excitement, just as writing the first one. And of course, I hope there'll be a certain excitement in bringing the series to an end. With that in mind, then, it's time for Koyomi Araragi to pay the piper, and this has been a novel one hundred percent endward bound, TSUKIMONOGATARI "Chapter Body: Yotsugi Doll."

She appeared first in the anime, but the cover of this novel is the first time Yotsugi Ononoki has been visually rendered for the books. Thank you very much, Mr. VOFAN. The only books left to go now are End Tale and End Tale (Cont.), so please stay with me for the Final Season, kicked off by this installment and featuring the tale's concluding trilogy.*

* The next installment turned out to be the unmentioned KOYOMIMONOGATARI, which Vertical will be publishing in two volumes due to its length. In the above, the original's mention of a "thirteenth" installment has been emended to "fourteenth" since the translated edition split BAKEMONOGATARI into three rather than two parts.

NISIOISIN

TSUKIMONOGATARI

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